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The better part of myself: a memoir of transition

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The better part of myself: A memoir of transition

by

Johnny D. Rogers

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of
Johnny D. Rogers
has met the requirements of Iowa State University



Signatures have been redacted for privacy




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BOOK PROPOSAL

The Better Part of Myself: A Memoir of Transition

Introduction

After living what might have seemed to be the better part of my life as a woman, at the age of 32, while attending Iowa State University, I changed my name from Carol Ann Rogers to Johnny D. Rogers and began to transition physically to life as a male. Written throughout this transition, *The Better Part of Myself* focuses on my life-long exploration of identity issues, my experience of openly transitioning while a full-time college student, and the impact my transition has on my female partner, friends, family members, and me. Most importantly, this book describes my efforts to become a complete human being, something that came closer to reality when I decided to identify as male and transsexual, rather than just as a male with a hole-riddled past. Traditional transition memoirists, such as Mario Martino, Renee Richards, and their non-transsexual co-authors, have largely sought to legitimize transsexualism as a medical condition, generate pity, and to project a fairly stereotypical image of heterosexual normality. Issues or experiences that might thwart this effort have often been left out of the narrative. Many gender politicians, such as Max Valerio and Kate Bornstien, have usually sought to problematize gender in an effort to abolish the concept altogether. Although self-written and unapologetic, their radical post-structuralist or queer theory approaches have proved inaccessible to many people. My book avoids these pitfalls by sharing in plain language what I have learned about transsexualism and how I have experienced it in the overall context of my life. Candid and humorous, full of dialogue and action, *The Better Part of Myself* will help fill the gap between traditional

transition memoir and the writings of gender politicians, and bring the everyday complexities of this man's transsexual experience vividly to life in 225 pages.

Outline

Looking Back

This short, introductory piece describes a symbolic act of closure in the garden one evening, just as I begin my transition to life as a male. However positive my transition will be, I feel that I could be leaving some things behind, that an aspect of me, of my life, is about to die. This brief reflection on the past leads into a look at my childhood in Chapter One. (3 pages)

Chapter One: Questions, Answers, and Blank Stares

Framed as my campus YWCA Brown Bag Lunch Series presentation on transgender issues, given about a year into my transition, this chapter provides basic vocabulary and information about what it means to be transgendered. As the question and answer portion of the presentation focuses on my childhood, flashbacks offer brief glimpses into my life—including family dynamics, religion, puberty and my own efforts to bury my gender identity—up to age eighteen. (26 pages)

Chapter Two: Making “Woman” Work

This chapter begins with my early efforts as an adult to be happy and successful while living as a woman, which include enlisting in the army, getting married, and attempting to femme myself out. The upheaval of divorce and reassignment to a base in Germany helps put me back in touch with painful memories and feelings from my chaotic childhood and youth, which I had been denying for years. The resulting depression lands me in an army hospital and culminates in release from military service. After this turning point, and through the assistance of a Twelve-Step program, Adult Children of Alcoholics, I begin to face and sort

through my feelings and experiences. Eventually moving to Iowa to find work, and preparing to return to college to finish a bachelor's degree, I find that in the middle of all these changes I want to take on the greatest challenge of all: completely removing the layers of emotional camouflage and rediscovering myself. (*Not yet written.*)

Chapter Three: Hormone City

The beginning of a romantic relationship with a female friend, Donna, is closely followed by the completion of my first year back at college and the realization that I want and need to transition. The relationship, college, and my transition will continue to be inextricably linked, throughout most the book, along with medical and surgical events. Donna initially supports my decision to transition, as I go through obligatory counseling, but changes her mind after we travel to see an endocrinologist and I begin to inject myself with testosterone. The arguments and tensions grow as my body begins to change. (30 pages)

Outsights

So that my interactions with other people, as I begin to be recognized as a male, don't get lost in the narrative of my relationship and medical experiences, this short section will provide a bit of balance. A woman is frightened by my masculine appearance on a dark night on campus, and a classmate suggests swapping girlfriends. Rather than giving me insight into my own life, these incidents give me "outsight" on other people's attitudes toward men and women. (4 pages)

Chapter Four: Off the Top

My relationship with Donna grows more tense as physical changes progress over the year. While some tension is relieved when my mastectomy is delayed by a bout with mononucleosis, it is still present, and returns with a vengeance a year later, when I complete

my bachelor's degree and finally have breast reduction surgery. Our intimacy disappears and is replaced with resentment. (29 pages)

Bathroom Sanctity

Another short section that offers a look at what is going on outside of my relationship and medical adventures. One month into my master's program, when the governor of Iowa signs an executive order banning discrimination on the basis of gender identity—among other things—and Republican lawmakers publicize their fears that Iowa's bathrooms will be taken over by transsexuals and transvestites, I'm nearly beaten up on my way to campus to teach First Year Composition. I am also questioned about the mysteries of the men's room by the very people I thought would be much better informed. (8 pages)

Chapter Five: Under the Knife

My relationship with Donna deteriorates further as I near the third year of my transition and a date for genital reconstruction surgery. Having surgery and recovering among a group of transsexuals in Montreal is inspiring and instructive. I discover my own transphobia and begin to cure myself of it with the help of several boisterous trans women. During recovery, a friend calls from Iowa to promise me roses and a box of condoms on my return, but I suspect, even before I leave Montreal, that my girlfriend isn't quite as thrilled. I've got a penis and testicles, Donna still identifies as a lesbian. Though she continues to promise she can work through the situation, I wonder about her motives and realize that I can't keep my life on hold forever for a relationship that is only becoming more damaging. (26 pages)

The Name Game

The last of the short sections relates my adventures in naming throughout my life, from nicknames to mangled surnames, from maiden name to married name, and beyond. Some names stick, some don't; some resurface at odd moments. (*Not yet written.*)

Chapter Six: Always Something

Only four months after my last surgery, I break up with Donna and move out of her house. A sense of closure, in the relationship and other things, seems elusive because the drama of change could not have been higher at some point, and then it just slowly trailed off into anticlimax. After I hand out "It's a Boy" cigars when my birth certificate is finally amended to read "Male," I do feel a sense of celebration and completeness, but I also discover, as I always suspected would be the case, that my transition is far from over. I find myself dealing with more challenges, such as going to the doctor for a pap smear when I've got male genitals, and the resulting news that I may have cervical cancer. Perhaps even more disturbing than the cancer scare is the fact that my new roommate has been methodically outing me to all his gay acquaintances in town without my knowing it, because he wants them to know, for some unknown reason, that "Johnny's not a *real* man." I realize that I will have to continue dealing with unusual circumstances like these for the rest of my life. And while I feel more congruent and whole than I have ever felt in my life, I recognize that much of life seems oddly new to me: I am free to discover what sort of man I want to be. This makes life much more enjoyable, even if it's not any easier. (*Not yet written.*)

Chapter Seven: Gay, Again

My relationship with a male friend becomes intimate. As this relationship with Bruce continues to develop, I take a fresh look at sexual identity and the politics of changing

labels—from straight, to lesbian, to bisexual, to gay—and finally decide that I haven’t been so overwhelmingly attracted to men over the years because I’ve always identified as male and wanted to focus on maleness, but because I’m actually gay. Navigating the uncharted waters of a post-transition relationship with an original-equipment gay man proves to be a bit awkward, but easier than expected, for both Bruce and me. What is most difficult is adjusting to things such as the dangers of expressing affection with another man in public; behavior that was ignored by others when I was a woman, or even winked at, could now result in a beating, or worse. And there is the possible harassment and discrimination that my partner may encounter as people, gay and straight, out me as an individual or us as a couple. These concerns are not overwhelming, however, when considered in the context of a relationship in which I can be fully present, fully myself, and be accepted as I am by a man with whom I connected from the moment we met. (*Not yet written.*)

Looking Ahead

This short, mirror-image piece to *Looking Back* continues the shift in focus that began in the previous chapter, from inward and backward to outward and forward, as I work with Bruce in his patio garden. (*Not yet written.*)

LOOKING BACK

A charcoal ribbon raced with the line of orange flames that were devouring the letter I held in my hand. Words crackled and were consumed. When the heat flared, so did my sense of loss. I opened my hand to let go of the paper, and watched as the soft glow drifted down to my feet, sparked, and went out. A mourning dove called plaintively from the garage roof. *Ooahoo oo oo.*

She was gone, and this small ritual seemed like the best way to mark her passing from my life. In a way, it felt strange to say goodbye at all. Only an aspect of myself, not a person or a personality, my female persona had helped keep me alive for many years. Represented by my birth name, Carol Ann, this persona was the means through which I had experienced the world, and even interacted with people I loved. I'd spent so much of my life denying the greater part of myself that it now seemed unrealistic and unhealthy to just drop the persona one day and pretend that she'd never existed. In order to be whole and authentic as Johnny I had to acknowledge, if not honor, all that I had been and done in the "clothing" of Carol Ann.

"Would you think it was strange if I did some sort of thing, a ritual or something, to say goodbye to, well, myself?" I had sheepishly asked my therapist one day. "My name change will probably be signed by a judge this week, and it's important to mark the occasion somehow."

Her eyebrows shot up, "I think that's a great idea. It sounds very healthy. Have you thought of how you might do that?"

“Well, some friends in Sioux City have invited me to have a “naming ceremony” in church. My old car will never make the three hour drive, and I’m not sure that’s how I want to handle this, anyway. I know they’re trying to be supportive, but my life isn’t there anymore, in that community, at that church, and I don’t feel like I need the official approval of a minister. This is more of a personal and spiritual thing than a religious or social one.”

My therapist looked at me intently as she settled into her chair, leaning back and crossing her legs. “So?” she asked, beginning to work a dark blue worry stone between the palms of her open hands.

“I thought that I would write a letter to myself—to Carol Ann—saying goodbye, thanking her for getting me through so much shit and making it possible for me to get to this point in my life...and to acknowledge some of the good things that I experienced. Then I thought that I could burn it out in the garden to get some closure, to symbolize that she’s fading out as the real me fades in. I mean, I can’t transition overnight, and this sort of honors the process.”

“Again, that sounds pretty healthy to me. When do you plan to do it?”

“This evening.”

Staring at the ashes, I felt the loss of dropping a familiar way of being, however painful it had been, and began to cry. So much of my life, it seemed, had been wasted, or ruined. There was so much that I had missed. My boyhood. Being able to relate to people with my whole self, instead of in fragments, bits, and pieces. The transition wasn’t going to be easy. I had no idea of what the future would bring. Harassment, violence, and the loss of my relationship could be around the corner. So many people have lost everything when

they've transitioned. This was the right thing for me to do, I never questioned that, but the healing and the wholeness could come at an awful price.

My tears fell until it was almost dark. Finally, though, remembering what I was about, I grabbed a shovel and began to methodically turn the ashes of my goodbye into the soil of the garden. I thought of the tomato plants that had grown in this spot over the summer, and of how the garden is a site of life, of the cycles of life. My mood began to change. I remembered that I had a new beginning here as Johnny. And with plenty of fertilizer from the past to grow on, there's no way that I could go wrong.

The past—it would always be there, and there was so much of it. I stopped digging to lean on the top of the shovel handle, my hands stacked, one on top of the other. A single ceremonial goodbye just wouldn't cover it all. I had to admit that the more I rediscovered myself and began to live as a man, the more the negative old memories surfaced, along with shame, pain, anger, and regret. They all arose from the dark, blank, distant past, and stood out in crisp contrast, with vivid detail, against the void of memories I had yet to recover. If I wanted wholeness, I'd have to sort through them all as they came, instead of cramming them back into the recesses of my consciousness. At least, I thought, as I walked back toward the house, leaned the shovel on the wall next to the back door, and stamped the dirt from my boots, I wouldn't have to do it all tonight.

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS, AND BLANK STARES

“I’m Kelley,” a dark-haired, slender young woman announced, “and I want to thank you for coming to the latest in our series of YWCA ‘Brown Bag Discussions’ on sexuality and gender.” Her musical voice and soft accent originated on an island somewhere in the southern half of the Pacific Ocean. “Our speaker today is Johnny Rogers, an undergraduate student here at Iowa State and a classmate of mine. He’ll be talking about transgender issues. He’s assured me that you’ll have a chance to ask him questions before we break up. Johnny?” She gestured toward me gracefully, and I watched the bright colors of her sarong ripple as she walked toward her chair at the back of the tiny meeting room. I was alone in front of the group with my overhead transparencies and notes. Lunch bags and trays from the Memorial Union food court, located downstairs, were shifted on laps or balanced on empty chair seats. Everyone was settling down to eat and listen. There looked to be thirty people out there, but a quick count assured me there were only twelve. I took a deep breath to slow down my pounding heart and began the presentation.

“Thanks, Kelley.” I flipped on the hot, blinding light of the overhead projector, and my first transparency came into focus: *Bending, Blending, and Transcending: A Tour of the Transgender Spectrum*. “There seems to be a growing interest in transgender issues these days, but a lot of people are confused about what the word means. Even people who call themselves transgender disagree about definitions—labels are always problematic—so I’m going to try to stick with basic information and issues that most trans folks would agree with. The idea isn’t to put people into neat little boxes, but to give us a vocabulary that will help reduce awkwardness and fear, and facilitate discussion. I’d like you to save the really

substantive questions for the end of the presentation, but please stop me at any point if you don't understand something I've just said. Hopefully, I can clarify it for you."

Movement caught my eye. A thin, gray-haired man in a faded, old army field jacket crossed his arms over his chest and scowled at the floor. I saw a few heads nod encouragingly, so I changed transparencies and forged ahead.

"First of all, I'd like to mention the fact that some people separate sex, meaning physical characteristics or genitalia, from gender, described as an internal sense of identity, the instinctive sense that one is male or female. These folks would like us to consider how every individual represents a unique gender. Others believe that sex and gender interact or influence each other in ways that we don't yet understand, and tend to use the words interchangeably."

There were a couple of blank expressions in the group so I held my jitters in check and counted to thirty before moving on, just to give the information a chance to be processed. "All right, now we can look at some working definitions. Transgender is usually used as an umbrella term for anyone who doesn't relate to traditional notions of male and female. Sometimes you'll hear people say 'trans,' which is just a shortened form of the word." I went down the list of terms on the overhead. "Included in the transgender spectrum are folks who do drag, cross dressers, gender benders, people born intersex, transsexuals, and transgenderists."

Flipping through the pile of transparencies, I explained each term.

"*Drag kings* are women who enjoy presenting themselves as men, but who do not want to *be* men. Drag kings are usually lesbians, but may also be bisexual or heterosexual women.

“*Drag queens* are men who enjoy presenting themselves as women, but who do not want to *be* women. Although the term *queen* implies that these performers of gender are gay, this isn’t always the case; some drag queens are bisexual or heterosexual men.”

All that was going on in the audience was quiet munching, and there were a few pleasant smiles. This was where terminology and experience, for most folks, began to go their separate ways, and I wondered what people would be thinking.

“*Cross dressers*, often referred to by the clinical term *transvestite*, are men and women who wear clothing that is typically associated with another gender because it feels good, expresses their personality, or is sexually stimulating. Many people could be considered cross dressers, but most self-identified cross dressers are heterosexual men.

“*Gender Bending* is presenting oneself in such a way as to give mixed gender cues, or to make a statement against rigid gender roles. A man who wears sandals that reveal painted toenails could be described as a mild gender bender, as could a woman who wears short hair, men’s clothing, and no makeup, but has long, elaborately painted fingernails. An extreme example of gender bending would be a hairy-chested man in a mini skirt and gauzy blouse with a sign on his back that reads ‘Am I asking for it?’”

A friend who had shown up, a huge bear of a guy, choked on a mouthful of lunch and lifted his napkin to his beard, while Kelley smiled and shook her head at the back of the room.

“*Intersex*” I continued, trying to stifle my own grin, “is the word used to describe people who are born with unusual genitalia or some form of both female and male genitalia. The old term for people who are intersexed is *hermaphrodite*. Researchers are beginning to understand how the sex of a fetus is formed in the first trimester of development, when

different hormones kick in. If the hormones fire at unusual times, the fetus can be born intersexed.

“Transsexual is a term that was first used by a German researcher, Magnus Hirschfeld, around 1923. Transsexuals are people whose anatomical sex does not match their gender identity. Transsexuals often take hormones and/or have surgery to bring their body in line with their brain; this is called transitioning. Although no one can say for sure, some researchers believe that gender identity, like sex characteristics, is also determined by hormones in the first trimester of development. The theory is that sex organs turn out to be unambiguous when the hormones fire at the usual times for their development, but if the hormones kick in at an unusual time while gender identity is being determined, the fetus can end up with a gender identity that doesn’t match their sex characteristics. Other research is beginning to reveal actual differences in a specific region of the brains of transsexual men and women.”

My transparencies slipped off of the projection unit and onto the floor. They hadn’t slid too far so I collected them as I added, “This is a complex subject, but I can answer many questions that you might have because I’m transsexual.” One woman on my left sat up straight and gasped a little. A few other people looked startled. My bear-like friend grinned encouragingly. “I was born with a female body,” I explained, having regained control of the slides, “but have always identified as a male.” No one said anything so I took a deep breath, found the next transparency, and put the others back on the tray. “Okay, let’s go on to the last term.”

“Transgenderist is a relatively new term that was coined in the mid 70’s by Virginia Prince. She was a full-time cross dresser who wanted to distance herself from transsexuals.

Today, the term is no longer being used in this negative, divisive way, and it describes someone who is comfortable with their anatomy, but who feels that labels like *male* or *female*, *man* or *woman*, don't quite describe who they are. A transgenderist may assert that their gender identity lies somewhere between male and female or that gender is an out-dated, useless construct altogether.

"That's the basic vocabulary. Remember that these categories aren't meant to pigeonhole people, but to help us discuss and understand different concepts and expressions of gender. Now, I'd like to cover some myths and facts, touch on the use of pronouns, and talk about a couple of medical issues before we get into the Q and A time.

"One of the most widely-circulated myths about transgender people, as well as lesbians and gay men, is that we are all child molesters and rapists. I'm not sure where this myth originated, because every study I've seen shows that child molesters and rapists are nearly always heterosexual men. Some folks seem to forget that rape is about power, not sex, gender, or sexual orientation.

"People who physically transition from one sex to another are often characterized as gay men or lesbians who are ashamed of their sexual orientation. This is certainly possible, but the fact that many transsexuals identify as gay or lesbian *after* they transition kind of blows this one out of the water.

"All right, pronouns. Who do you call what, and when? Sometimes you just need to ask. It might feel a bit uncomfortable, but just ask a person if you're not sure how they want to be addressed and referred to. Genderless pronouns have been devised, though I'm not sure by whom. *Ze* has been suggested as a replacement for he and she, and *hir* as a

replacement for his and her. I try to use these whenever people request them, but it takes some getting used to.

“Finally, I’d like to mention the medical establishment. Some health professionals still pathologize transsexuals, which are described as having Gender Identity Disorder, or GID, by the American Psychiatric Association. Homosexuality hasn’t been a disorder since the 70’s, but GID still is. It’ll probably take a while for this to change, but many psychologists are sure that it eventually will.

“A lot of people still don’t know that many intersexed infants are being operated on shortly after birth, to make their genitals appear to be either male or female. Boys with small penises, for example, are surgically reassigned as girls. There are at least two problems with this. First, surgery often hampers sexual function, or makes them incapable of orgasms, and second, many of the infants who are operated on end up having a gender identity that is the opposite of their reconstructed genitals. A few different organizations, like the Intersex Society of North America and Hermaphrodites with Attitude, have been formed to convince the medical establishment to change this practice so that children, as they mature, can decide how they identify and whether or not they want to have surgery.

“I’m running out of time so I’ll stop there. This has really been a crash course, and I imagine that you have a lot of questions. Go ahead and fire away.”

I nervously straightened my tie and shoved my hands into the front pockets of my Levi’s. Someone coughed. Finally, a quiet voice suggested, “I just want to know more about you. I mean, I’ve never met anyone who’s, uh, like you.” The woman who’d spoken had also blushed. Her eyes were on me, but I could barely see them. Her head was tilted down so that her curly brown hair fell forward, over her face. “How did you, I mean... when

you were little, did you think you were a boy? I'm a mother, and I...I just...I wonder what I would do if one of my children told me...this kind of thing."

The first question was one that I expected to be asked, so I relaxed a bit more. "The earliest time I remember telling someone that I was a boy was when I was four years old." As I described the scene to the group, the details began to replay in my mind, and it seemed so odd to take what was mostly a bunch of academically-oriented strangers back with me to a moment in a bathroom, in 1969.

I had straddled the toilet, and done my best to direct the flow of urine into the bowl. Most of it, however, had run into my pants and dribbled down my left leg. I stood there trying to understand why this hadn't worked. I was supposed to be able to pee standing up, but no matter how I tried it wouldn't happen. What was wrong? I knew my mother would be angry again—beyond angry.

"But mom," I explained when she caught me, for the third or fourth time that year, with wet underwear and shorts, "I'm a boy."

To my surprise she sighed, and sounded more bewildered than angry. Lowering her tall frame into a demure crouch, she stared at a point somewhere off to my right. Her hands, large and strong, rested on the white linen fabric of her skirt, pulled tight across her knees. The sleeveless blouse she was wearing showed off arms that were tan and muscular from landscaping the yard, fixing up our old house, playing organ and piano at church, and painting colorful, expansive murals. Her strawberry-blonde hair was set in waves that softened the strong features of her profile. When she finally turned her head, I was looking into a pair of resolute blue eyes.

“Now, we’ve talked about this before,” she said quietly in a voice that was deep, smooth, and calming. “Don’t you mean you wish that you could *do* the things boys do? It’s *okay* to be a girl. Girls can be and do almost anything that boys can.”

When I didn’t reply, she took hold of my shoulders. Her eyes narrowed and her lips compressed into a grimace. Her voice became dark and brittle. “You’ve got to stop this. You’re a girl, and that’s as good as being a boy. We’re not going to talk about it any more. Do you understand? Go change your clothes!”

“Really, for the sixties, my mother was pretty hip, I think.” I told the group. “Here she was, assuring me that young women could do anything they wanted to...”

“Cept pee standing up,” someone mumbled.

“Well, yeah.” I agreed. “She did make it clear that it was wrong for me to pee standing up, and that it was wrong to say I was a boy. At some point, I began to feel that something was wrong with *me*, because no one could recognize that I was a boy or would even let me talk about being a boy.

“Think about it,” I continued, trying to give everyone some sort of context, “As a four-year old in 1969, I had no frame of reference for my thoughts and feelings. And I really can’t blame my mother, because she didn’t either. At that point in time, no female-to-male transsexual was “out” to the general public. Only Christine Jorgensen, who is male-to-female, had gone public in the 50s with her experience of traveling to Europe for Sex Reassignment Surgery. She only did this after some of her medical records were leaked to the press, and she endured quite a lot of hurtful, ignorant comments, derisive jokes, and name calling. In New York there was an endocrinologist, Harry Benjamin, who published

The Transsexual Phenomenon in 1966, but his positive attitude couldn't shake the notion that transsexualism was a rare, white, male, upper-middle class illness. There's no way I could have been aware of any of this. All I could do was search my mind, wonder about why I was different and why my mother was so angry with me. Shame just kind of wrapped itself around the core of my identity...my, uh, sense of boyiness. Part of me just shut down."

"I want to know," another woman broke in, "if you just had brothers, or if you had any sisters. I mean, were there any women around, other than your mom, that you could identify with?" Her posture was ramrod straight, her eyes were flashing, and she had a knowing look on her face.

I couldn't hold back a wry smile. "Yes, there were. I grew up with two older brothers, *and* two older sisters. And my mother's mother was around quite a bit, too."

She looked deflated. There was a long period of silence in the group.

In the silence, I wondered what images of a transsexual's childhood other non-trans audience members would imagine. They had to be more exotic than my own recollections of family dynamic. Instead of a lack of female or male influence in my life, I had the, unfortunately, much more common experience of family violence. It killed every sibling's sense of safety and self-esteem. The atmosphere had been so volatile. Violence exploded without any warning, and for no apparent reason. At least that's how it seemed to me at the time. Douglas, with eleven years on me, was the oldest and frequently exploded with anger. Al was five years up, and his mission in life was to tease me mercilessly. The youngest and smallest in the family, I did everything I could to get Al in trouble with our mother and father. My two sisters, Rose and Diane, were ten and nine years older than myself, and never let up on their clawing words. One day, a fight erupted behind the couch, in the living

room.

“I know you’ve been reading my diary. There are scratch marks around the lock,” Rose yelled at Diane, shaking the damaged book in her face.

“I haven’t touched your precious diary. I don’t care about your “inner thoughts,” Diane countered as she swirled one hand in an aristocratic wave.

“Then how else did half the school find out about—“

“Hey, I don’t start up all the gossip at school.”

“Meow! Phtt, phtt!” Douglas spat as he clawed at the air. Our oldest brother had appeared out of nowhere.

Diane and Rose glared at him. “Shut up!” they yelled in tandem.

I turned back to the TV to watch a brand new show. Mr. Rogers was putting on his cardigan and canvas sneakers, and singing about a beautiful day in the neighborhood. I heard my sisters’ scream and footsteps pounding down the hallway. A door slammed and there was a dull “pop.”

“Son of a...goddamned...bitch!” Douglas screamed as he stalked past me and into the kitchen, holding one hand close to his body. I moved to hide behind a chair, wondering if he’d come after me next. Before I ducked out of sight I noticed that the arm attached to that hand was covered in white powder. When I heard the kitchen door open and close again, I crept onto the couch and looked over the top of it, so that I could see down the hallway. At the very end there was an enormous hole, with a chunk of the drywall hanging by a thread. No sign of my sisters. They were still in their room, behind the locked door.

Another afternoon, Porky Pig was just signing off for the Loony Toons gang when a car pulled up in the driveway. Al, who had been a sandy-haired heap on the couch,

disappeared without a sound. My oldest sister, Rose, flew down the hall toward our room, a book under one arm and her waist length auburn hair fluttering behind. I switched off the television before running out the back door. Our father was home from work. It was easier to disappear until mom called us for supper than to physically and emotionally tiptoe around dad for an hour. Sometimes, Doug and Diane would just avoid coming home for supper altogether.

“So, there you are. I wonder that you bothered to come home at all,” I heard my father say one evening.

I was scribbling in a coloring book at the dining room table, long after the dishes had been cleared. The bright light and expansive work area made me feel like a wildlife photographer shooting film, or a professional artist in a studio drawing lions and zebras on a grassy plain. Never mind that my film and pen were courtesy of Crayola. It didn't matter that the zebras were indistinguishable from black spotted dogs and that the lions looked like lemon-yellow sheep, I was having a great time. And with Al spending the night at a friend's house, I had the added luxury of not having to put up with his angry taunts and tickle attacks. It had been so quiet until my father's harsh voice, coming from the kitchen, broke through the calm.

“I suppose you're here just to raid your mother's purse again.”

“Fuck you!” That was Douglas' voice. “She's never got much anyway. You never let a dime squeeze through your goddamn fingers.”

I slid out of my chair and slowly walked to the sliding pocket door that could be closed to separate kitchen from dining room. It was open just enough that I could see my brother's messy brown hair and taunting smile. His slender, muscular frame was tensed up

and he was shaking.

“As long as you live in this house, you will not talk to me that way. I won’t tolerate such nonsense,” my father boomed. He had taken a step closer to Douglas, and I could seem him now. His presence, like a huge, swarthy Cossack, was menacing.

Douglas didn’t budge. He just doubled his grin, leaned toward our father, and fairly whispered, “Waddya gonna do about it, old man?”

“You just watch your step.”

“Why? You might do something like this...” Douglas threw a punch.

Next thing we all knew, my brother was on the kitchen floor, leveled by a Cossack jab.

“Get out! Now!”

Even I thought it was a good idea to follow my father’s advice, and I ran to hide in my room as angry words continued to echo through the house.

Soon afterward, just short of his eighteenth birthday, my brother would find himself on the USS Kitty Hawk, headed for Southeast Asia. It amounted to the exchange of one war zone for another.

The stone-faced, gray-haired man in the group came suddenly to life and sat up in his chair, interrupting my flashbacks. “I’ve got a question,” he spat in a gravelly voice. “Do you believe in God? How do you think *He* feels about your *sex change*?”

Oh, great. A Bible thumper. I dealt with enough of that as a kid. If only this guy knew. I probably had a better grounding in the Bible and Protestant Christian doctrine than he had as a child.

“Where did you go?” my mother had asked me, later that same night, after the fight between my brother and father. Her eyes were swollen and red, her voice hoarse. “You left all your crayons on the table. And, why do you look so sad, honey?”

“I’m scared,” I answered, peeking over my bed covers. “Everybody fights all the time. Al teases me when you’re not home...says it’s my fault...” I began to cry.

“Oh, everything’s all right,” my mother cooed. “Just pray to Jesus. That’s what I do when I’m sad or afraid. Jesus loves you. He’ll keep you safe. All you have to do is believe.”

Oh, I believed! I thought that if I prayed to Jesus and tried to act like the perfect girl, my mother wouldn’t be mad at me, my family would quit fighting, and everyone would like me better. Maybe, I thought, I’d even forget that I was a boy. I didn’t see any changes, though—in myself or in my family—and I certainly didn’t feel any safer. Pulling the covers up over my head each night, I prayed for Jesus to help me, and sometimes cried myself to sleep.

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. There were so many promises tied up in the name that I heard at least once every day, and many more times on Sunday.

“Now, as the organ is playing,” the preacher said nearly every Sunday to quietly wind up his sermon, “I invite you to come down front, here. If you’re sick and sad, just come on down. The deacons will pray with you. Confess the black sins that are poisoning your life. Lay them down at the cross of Jesus. He died and suffered,” his voice began to crescendo, “that your sins might be forgiven. Ask Jesus into your heart right now and he’ll make all things new! You’ll be a new man in Christ! Peace will fill your heart, all fear and

sadness will melt away.” A drop of sweat rolled slowly off the end of his nose as he draped his arms over the podium, leaned closer to the microphone, and whispered hoarsely, “Please come!”

I looked across the sanctuary, with its red, plush, theater-style seats and thick red carpeting, to the river scene painted above the baptismal pool, where, on other Sundays, people waded in and were plunged backward into the water by the minister. Over at the organ, my mother was playing “Just As I Am.” The congregation swayed slightly and somberly sang “O, Lamb of God, I come, I come.” In my heart, I was continually coming to Jesus, and I wondered how many times I would have to confess my sins before He would forgive me, accept me, and make all the horrible things in my life go away. Maybe I just wasn’t doing it right, somehow. Maybe I was such a terrible person that God didn’t want to forgive me. I mean, I couldn’t figure out what I’d done wrong, exactly, but I must have done *something* because life was so awful. Maybe it was nothing I’d done, but just me. God seemed angry with who I was. I’d have to keep trying to be good as a girl—to be a good girl.

“I wouldn’t attempt to speak for the Creator,” I told the group. “There’s no conflict with my spiritual life, though. It would take a long time to explain, but my acceptance of myself as a transsexual man was part of a process of spiritual growth.”

Impatient with the last question, a woman with glasses and long, braided red hair, looked at the gray-haired man and sighed loudly. Cocking her head to one side, she asked me, “Were you a tomboy or did you try to do a lot of girl things?”

Everyone was stuck on my childhood. “It would take more than a twenty minute Q and A session to explain everything that I can remember, but I’ll try to hit the highlights—sort of the rites of passage. My childhood was a mixed bag. I had a fairly open-minded mother, like I told you, but the roles and rules for women and men were pretty clearly defined by the church I attended, and all of the media were projecting the same sorts of images. It was really awkward, and I have no doubt that it screwed me up, but I tried pretty hard to do the girl thing.”

Trying to be a girl was tough going for many, many years. I remember trying to make myself wear skirts and frilly clothes, and to say that I liked anything else that people told me was “for girls.” When I was five, my mother made an Easter dress for me that had white flowers on a black background, with puffy sleeves and a large yellow grosgrain ribbon for a belt. Lacey ankle socks and shiny black shoes finished off the ensemble. I remember a photograph of myself in this dress, standing awkwardly, with head tilted and eyes squinting in the bright sun, shoulder-length hair stiffening out of the flip my mother had tried to curl into it. A later photograph shows me in a crop top and hip-hugger bell-bottoms, hand on hip, looking more comfortable, with attitude. Everyone said that I was cute and sassy. Guess I was beginning to catch on.

In any case, I continued to like and want things that were “for boys.” Football was the growing passion, and the Packers were my team. Greg, who lived across the street, wanted to be the next Joe Namath.

“I get the pants and the cleats, you get the pads and the jersey.”

“What about the helmet?” I asked.

“Go without, that way it’ll be even—two things each.”

Greg went into his house and came back out in the cleats, green socks, and padded white pants of the kid-sized Jets uniform. With his reddish, buzzed haircut and round, freckled face, he looked more like a fugitive bat boy than the apprentice to Broadway Joe, but he owned the uniform so he was the quarterback.

“Go long!”

I sprinted down the sidewalk and turned back in time to pull the ball out of the air, but the play wasn’t over. Greg had suddenly become a free safety; his porch was the end zone. I ran right for him.

Crack! Grunt.

Greg had heaved his upper body into my chest, lifted me off my feet, and dumped me on my butt. Fat lot of help the pads were. It took a while for me to catch my breath. When I opened my eyes, Greg was standing over me.

“Held onto the ball. I’ll give you that.”

Gasp.

Football with only two players could get old pretty quickly. When it did, Greg would grab his steel army helmet and cap pistol, I would pick up a stick for a rifle, and we’d head for a nearby construction site to play commando. We scrambled through the openings in walls that would soon be windows and went over the sides of trenches that ran between the buildings—trenches that had been dug for water and sewage pipes. Rocks sailed through the air in high arcs and detonated with our best vocal imitation of an explosion. Greg was the company commander who made me his first sergeant as the war in Viet Nam went raging on. My oldest brother was a sailor on the *Kitty Hawk*, and that was

okay, but *I* was a soldier. Soldiers got to drive tanks, use flame throwers, and throw several types of grenades—the army had the best toys.

I think it was the summer after we finished first grade when Greg announced that he had to quit playing with me. Some of the other guys told him he was a sissy, that he shouldn't be spending so much time with girls. Greg beat the guys up, but he still wouldn't play with me. I didn't have any other good friends, and it would become increasingly harder to make friends as my father began to change jobs and the family began to move to one house, one town after another. Wherever we went, kids thought that I was "different," and teased me, even though they couldn't say *how* I was different. When they weren't teasing, they just pretended that I didn't exist.

"Mr. Mills," I complained one day, "the other kids tease me, or act like I'm invisible. They don't like me because I'm different. What's so different about me?"

The old face of this fifth grade teacher crinkled into a smile that was meant to be reassuring. "Well," he began in a dry, dusty voice, "You're new here, that's all. I think that you're trying too hard. Don't worry about doing things that will make them like you, just be yourself. That's all you have to do."

I walked out of Mr. Mills' classroom in a daze, feeling frustrated and very much alone. This was as real as I could get. The rules for how I should behave seemed to have changed, but no one had told me. I was unsure of the original rules, anyway, and forgotten why I'd tried so hard to follow them, so I guess it didn't matter. I just couldn't win with people at school. Good thing I could spend a few afternoons a week at the stables.

"Okay, push down and forward into the saddle with your butt—that should encourage Max to go over the jump." My instructor, a big woman in jeans and boots, with

long, wispy blonde hair, leaned on the split rails of the riding ring and chewed on a toothpick.

I turned the small gelding with the big attitude back toward the four foot fence and applied pressure as instructed. Max and I slid right into the fence in a cloud of dust. His front hooves just touched the wood.

The instructor walked over and patted the horse's chestnut behind. "This is English Pleasure, Max, not Western Pleasure, and you're not a cutting horse." Max bent his neck, turned his long face toward her, and curled his upper lip. She ignored him and turned to me, "Try it again. This time, tap Max's behind with the crop, lightly. That should be enough to get him over."

We did another slide. Dust flew and a few small dirt clods clattered into the wood fence. Max had been a schooling horse for too long. He was tired of teaching youngsters how to ride, and had decided to go on strike. This was a war of the wills.

I turned Max and circled back around. Cantering up to the jump I swung the hand with the crop alongside my leg and applied pressure with my butt. He saw that crop, felt the pressure, and knew I was serious. We cleared the jump with a foot to spare.

"Didn't know you had it in you, did you, Max?" My instructor teased. She patted my leg and added, "Bet you didn't, either. Great job."

I was good at riding and I loved learning how to work with and take care of the big animals. The stables were a separate world where my family and friends didn't exist, where I felt welcome and competent, and where gender didn't matter. Here, no one complained that I walked like a guy, with my feet wide apart. In the stalls I didn't have to listen to a lecture on how I pitched my voice down too low for a girl, and how speaking that way

would wear on my vocal chords. The horses didn't care how I spoke, walked, or dressed.

Unfortunately, my father thought that riding was a waste of time and money—even when I covered the cost by working for my instructor. Driving me to the stables was an inconvenience to my mother. It was all over too soon. My outlet was gone, just as life was about to get more difficult than ever before: Puberty was about to set in.

“Have you been planning to get a bra soon, Carol?” One of the seventh grade girls asked me as I walked down the hallway at school. Like me, she was already taller than most of the boys our age. Unlike me, she was curvy and blonde, and definitely benefited from a little foundational support.

“Think I need one?” I gasped. I was only in the sixth grade, and I hadn't even thought about wearing a bra; it never entered my mind that I'd ever need one.

“Oh, yes,” she answered in that superior seventh-grader tone, “you're really starting to show. Better talk to your mom.”

My mother was surprised when I mentioned my busty classmate's suggestion, but looked me up one side and down the other, and then drove me off to the store.

“We'll go to a really good store and have you fitted properly,” she assured me as we pulled up to an upscale department store. The whole thing was beginning to feel way too complicated. I self-consciously hunched over and defensively drew in my shoulders as we wended our way through the cosmetics counters and started up the escalator.

“Now zhen, what can I do for you?” The short, round saleswoman with the tightly curled graying hair stepped from behind her counter. She had a good grip on either end of the measuring tape that she wore around her neck and peered over reading glasses that barely clung to her nose. I got the feeling that no one who entered her territory went

unchallenged.

“My daughter needs a bra.”

“Und vhat size does she take?”

“I don’t know. She’s hasn’t needed one ‘til now.”

“Ahhhh,” the red face of the woman finally turned to look at me. “Zo you are becoming *ze real* woman, now.”

I crossed my arms over my chest and dropped my eyes to study my shoes.

“Come mit me. I vhill meazure und fit you.”

I looked back at my mother, begging with my eyes for her to save me. She just nodded and smiled. Behind the curtain of the dressing room, the woman measured around my body, first under the breasts, then at their fullest point—such as it was. Roughly spinning me around, she even measured the width of my shoulders and distance from my neck to the middle of my back before bustling into the forest of bras, panties, and other shiny, slippery garments. I was glad she was gone. I hated having her touch me. Focusing on my body was uncomfortable. I didn’t want to think about it, and I certainly didn’t want anyone to see it or give it any attention. I wished I’d never said anything to my mother, and I hated her for bringing me to this place.

“Put zhis on.” The woman had returned and was dangling a small white elastic at me. It looked more like a sling shot than the bras my mother and sisters wore. Theirs were much bigger, satiny, and came with wires. When I took it from her, she closed the curtain of the dressing cubicle and waited outside.

I must have stared at that training bra for ages, until the woman coughed and said, “Show me, please.” I just had time to climb into it before she threw back the curtain and

began to untwist the elastic straps and yank it back and forth on my chest. Then she invited my mother to come in and have a look. It was cold. They were staring at my body. I thought that I was going to be sick.

“Yes,” my mother broke the long silence, “we’ll take that one.”

I darted back behind the curtain and frantically pulled on my shirt. All this trouble for a lousy training bra. Why couldn’t we have just picked one up at Kmart?

My mother and I traveled home in silence, but once we got there, every female relative declared, “Ooooh, so you’re a *real* woman, now!” When I got ready for bed that night, I ripped off the bra and threw it in a corner.

Just about the same time that I acquired the bra, the school was showing films, separately, to groups of sixth grade boys and girls, which explained puberty. The pink and lavender diagram of ovaries and vagina seemed so surreal. A little, round, white dot (an egg) broke free from its home in the ovary and bounced through the crookedly drawn fallopian tube. A disembodied voice full of static described menstruation over the loud speakers. This was such a strange, foreign subject for a cartoon.

“Where are all the boys?” I whispered to the girl on my right. I wanted to see what they were seeing.

“They’re watching *their own* film,” she hissed back, then giggled with the girl next to her. Soon, all the girls around me were giggling.

I went home that day and took a good look at my body, as if for the first time. The image in the mirror was mine, but, for just a moment, I was looking at my body from outside of it, from far away. It seemed okay, but it wasn’t quite right somehow. I thought about

how the film said it would continue to change, to become more curvy and rounded. Though I wasn't sure why, I cried.

Throughout my childhood I'd had vague illnesses that mystified the doctors and aggravated my parents (fatigue, severe growing pains, chronic diarrhea, light-headedness, and stomach upset), but they suddenly began to get worse and more frequent after my eleventh birthday, when I began menstruating. For a brief time—in the midst of going through tests to determine why I had severe stomach pain and acid reflux—I remember thinking that I could not believe I was growing breasts; they shouldn't be there. And what about my penis and testicles? Why could I now feel my “package,” sense it was there, when I didn't have one? It was too mind bending—and too scary to even consider telling my mother. She'd think I was a freak, like when I used to pee standing up. I hadn't thought about that in a long time. I certainly wasn't about to tell a doctor I had a phantom penis and knew that I was really a guy; the doc would think I'd gone psycho. The diagnosis? Stress from social problems at school and conflict at home, resulting in a duodenal ulcer and esophageal spasms. The doctor suggested a bland diet and counseling. *My own* prescription? Forget the penis; there was nothing I could do about my situation, anyway. I may be stuck like this, but I could try to shut the past out, override it by making “woman” work for me. I wouldn't let myself be held back by all the stupid rules about what women could and could not do. Angry and determined, I'd be my own sort of woman, a woman unlike any other.

“I'm sorry,” Kelley broke in, but it's almost one o'clock, so we've only got time for one more question.”

The woman who'd asked about my mother's reaction to me as a child looked up, leaned forward, and rested her elbows on her knees before asking, "How does your mother feel about you, now....I mean, as a man?"

"Well, the answer is complicated. My family is still pretty dysfunctional—uh, enmeshed—so I haven't had a lot of contact with my mother since I left home. Just the occasional letter or card. I began to transition in the month of October, and the Christmas after that she sent me a card, asking me to tell her about my life. I didn't write back immediately, because I was, well, you see, it's possible to call the police, tell them you have a close relative who says they're transsexual, and they're legally able to take your relative to a hospital for 72 hours of observation in a psychiatric ward. I actually know two people whose families did this. They were released pretty quickly, but it was a traumatic experience.

"No kidding," a man off to my right exclaimed in disbelief, shaking his head back and forth.

"Most people like to wait a while," I continued, "'til their transition is in full swing, before they come out to family. If the cops come to the door looking for a crazy woman who thinks she's a guy, and a man with a beard opens it, they're not going to dispute the fact that he's male."

A snorty sort of laugh and assorted chuckles filled the room.

"I did start to write a letter the next summer, after my mother sent that card I mentioned, the one asking me to tell her what my life was like. It took over a month of writing and re-writing because I didn't want it to sound angry, or make my mother think that I was blaming her for anything. But I didn't want to be apologizing for my existence,

either. It was incredibly hard to know what to say, and how to say it. Finally, I sent it out in August.”

Hope all is going well with you this hot, hot summer. I'm doing great, and finally have an opportunity to write to you. The past couple of years have been very busy and full of major changes...are you still certain that you'd like to hear about my life? I'll begin with the less startling news, but you'll definitely want to be sitting down to read about the rest!

I'm a year away from finishing a bachelor's degree in English Literature, with a minor in African-American Studies. Somehow, I've managed to keep my G.P.A. over 3.5, and was awarded an undergraduate research assistantship for the upcoming year. Next year, I may go on to grad school or just find a job that involves a lot of writing, which is what I most enjoy doing.

There's really no way to ease into the more mind-blowing sort of news, so I'll just have to jump right in... You know that I've been working through a lot of issues in counseling, on and off, over the years. Well, the most difficult of these issues for me to face and deal with directly has been my gender identity. I have always struggled with feelings that I should have been born with a male body. Diagnosed as transsexual, I am now working with several health professionals, including an endocrinologist and my therapist. As difficult as this may be to believe or understand, I have been "in transition" for some time, and am now living as a male. I've attached a short article about what it means to be transsexual, and hope that it will help to answer most of the questions that you probably have.

I hope that you will not feel as though I'm blaming you or trying to make you feel guilty about anything. I'm writing because you asked about my life, and because I want you to know that your daughter, Carol Ann, is now your son: My legal name is Johnny D. Rogers, my voice has deepened into the range of a baritone, I have grown a goatee, and I actually do function in the world as a male. I am healthier and happier than I have ever been in my life. My partner, Donna, and I have been working through the changes and are growing together. I've encountered a lot more tolerance and support than I imagined I would from old friends and people on campus. I hope that you will be able to take this all in and make the transition with me.

If you don't want or need to write back to me, I will certainly understand.

All my best,

Johnny

"I really didn't expect her to reply. When I did hear back from her, at Christmas," I explained to the group, "I got a card addressed to 'Carol Ann.'"

"Oh," the woman responded with a pained look on her face, "she can't take it, then." Was she upset for me or my mother? Maybe she felt for us both. "Yeah. My mother's had to deal with a lot of heavy stuff in her life, so I wasn't surprised. Must've been too much for her. I was just glad she didn't tell me I was going to hell, had totally ruined her life, or something like that."

"Mmm," the woman shook her head as she gathered up her papers and purse. "Just give her time. Trust me, I'm a mother."

“Thank you, Johnny, for coming today,” Kelley threw in. There was scattered, polite applause and the scraping of chair legs as the group broke up. “Next week’s Brown Bag Discussion will be...”

I tuned out Kelley’s voice, grabbed my transparencies, stuffed them in an envelope, and tried to remember where my backpack was.

“Thanks, Johnny,” Kelley told me on my way out the door. “This was so cool. You even managed to get a word out of the Fred Phelps mole.”

“Uh, the older guy who asked about God’s opinion of me? He’s in with the Westboro Baptist crowd?” I was glad that I hadn’t known this before. The Rev. Fred Phelps and the congregation of Westboro Baptist Church, in Kansas, are well known for their picket lines at the funerals of AIDS victims, as well as any sort of event that is remotely connected with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) folks. At ISU’s last commencement ceremony, they had brought along small children, four or five years old, to hold signs that read things like “Burn in Hell, ISU Faggots” and “God Hates Fags.” Phelps’ reason? The recent success of the Safe Zones Project, which had, at that time, put some 1,500 stickers in offices around campus, indicating that the person who posted the sticker was supportive of LGBT students, that they didn’t need to censor their speech or be afraid of persecution. Because ISU is a fairly conservative school, Phelps’s condemnation seemed ironic to some and offensive to all.

“Yeah, can’t remember his name, but he’s come to every discussion we’ve had on women’s issues, sexuality, and civil rights. First time I’ve heard him speak. Your answer didn’t give him much room to respond, though.”

“Glad of that, believe me.”

Kelley nodded, “Me too.” She threw her arms around my neck in a quick hug and added, “Well, I have to dash off to class, now. Thanks again, Johnny.”

“Oh, you’re very welcome,” I smiled weakly. She waved and swooshed out the door, her long hair flying and her colorful sarong flapping like a parrot’s wings. Alone in the room, I flipped the light switch and pulled the door closed, mumbling to myself, “I’m just going home for a couple of days, now—to recover.”

Talking about my life, breaking the silence surrounding transsexualism was great, but it took a lot of energy to stick my neck out. I never knew how people would respond. Still, there was something that kept me going, something that had often encouraged me not to shy away from things that were difficult or uncomfortable.

I turned down the long corridor leading to the front entrance of the Memorial Union. The afternoon sun was lighting up the stained glass panels over the names of ISU graduates who had died in all of the armed conflicts since World War One. The voice of a family friend, a World War Two bomber pilot whom I’d gotten to know when I was a teenager, echoed in my mind as my footsteps rang through the granite and marble corridor. “I know you’re sick of hearing people say you should be yourself, so I’ll tell you not to worry about being different—or what others may say is different. A lot has already been sacrificed to make this world safe for people who seem different from others. It’s an old fight that we can’t ever give up on.”

Beyond the stained glass, out under the sun, wisps of white floated slowly across the sky and the deepest of the campanile bells tolled the hour.

HORMONE CITY

“So, if you’re male, how do you want to be called?” Donna, my girlfriend, was the first person to ask me that question, and the speed of my response surprised both of us.

“John.” I just knew, at once, what it should be.

As I tried it on, though, by rolling it around in my thoughts and being called John by Donna and one of my friends on campus, it became clear that the name sounded too serious. So I opted for Johnny. My Grandfather Rogers' family came from the South, and though John is the family name, Johnny would certainly not be unheard of in southern states. As I thought more about the southern family ties, I realized that the old Confederate soldier's nickname of “Johnny Reb” was also appropriate. I have often seemed like a rebel to many people, frequently crossing social boundaries in the process of just being myself. Besides, taking a name that was somewhat gender neutral, rather than traditionally masculine, was the perfectly natural thing for me to do.

I was surprised when Donna was so comfortable with my new name that she suggested a middle initial for me: D, for David. I thought that she would be freaking out. We had met as lesbians, after all. But Donna seemed, since I'd told her I was male, to be taking all of my gender identity exploration in stride. She even went to the store with me to pick out some clothes that were more masculine, that helped to de-accentuate the curves of my body and make me feel a bit more comfortable, more congruent. I had already been wearing a lot of men's clothing, but had never tried to wear things that gave my body the appearance of being male. When we got home with the clothes I began to try them on, to see what worked and what didn't.

“Okay, how about these?” I asked as I strolled into the living room in Dockers and an oxford.

“Well, it would be alright,” she answered as she left her chair and walked toward me, her head cocked to one side, “if you weren’t wearing your pants up around your armpits.” Before I knew what was happening, she had grabbed my pants and yanked them in the direction of my ankles.

“What the hell...?”

She just ignored my response and stepped back to take another look. “There,” she announced, “much better. You look good.”

Better for whom? I was sure that the crotch of the pants was down around my knees and that my butt would be showing if it weren’t for my shirttails. And the six-inch wide Ace bandage that strapped my breasts close to my chest didn’t feel very comfortable, either. The heavy white cotton undershirt I wore over the bandage made me feel like Nanuck of the North, wrapped up in layers. I felt foolish. Huffing my way back to the bedroom, I stopped in the hall to look in the mirror. The sight was amazing. My hips had narrowed and my chest had been deflated. I stood there and stared. Maybe everything *would* be okay.

“See,” Donna said as she stepped behind me and peered over my shoulder, “you look good.”

What a pair we made. Although we were the same height, her square shoulders, blonde hair, and tanned complexion contrasted with my lightweight frame, dark hair, and acne-prone face.

“We look like a dyke and a little gay boy,” Donna laughed and hugged me from behind.

A dyke and a gay boy. Donna already saw us differently, as a couple, and we'd only known each other for four or five months. I thought about how we met, and wondered how much our relationship would change as I transitioned.

I had been on the way to class when the lilting voice of a friend had floated down the hall. "You *are* coming to hear the speaker this weekend, aren't you, Carol Ann? Someone I think you should meet will be there." With her petite frame, dark hair, and twinkling eyes, Barb looked like a black Irish leprechaun. She taught Comparative Religion on campus, and, because of her mischievous, friendly ways, knew everyone within a three-hundred mile radius. "You and Donna have a lot in common. She likes to go hiking, has a couple of dogs and cats, and is addicted to coffee. Perfectly compatible." Her hands were drawn together under her chin in a prayerful pose, and I could swear that her eyelashes had just fluttered a bit.

It always annoyed me when anyone tried to play matchmaker, and this was the third time that my friend had mentioned this woman. Maybe the truth would fend her off. "Barb, the last time a lesbian set me up with someone I ended up marrying the guy!" What I was really thinking, as she made a dirty face at me and stalked off toward her office in an exaggerated huff, was that this person might actually be worth getting to know. I wouldn't have to wait more than a week to find out.

I knew it was Donna the moment I saw her sitting in my matchmaking friend's office. I just stepped in the door, got one look at short, blonde hair, cerulean eyes, a single earring and a confident, easy going manner, and decided that this had to be her.

"Good morning." Donna's low, smooth voice made my knees buckle.

“Donna, this is Carol Ann.” Barb said without turning around to look at me. She was too busy fumbling around with a new video camera that had been procured to record this morning’s lecture by a visiting scholar.

“Hey. It’s good to meet—” This exchange was interrupted by a curse. Donna and I looked at Barb, then back at each other. She was hopeless when it came to electronics. I grabbed the instructions, Donna grabbed the box, and the two of us got the camera up and running.

An hour or so later, after the lecture had ended and the video camera was safely back in its storage case again, Donna offered to take me home. It was a short drive so there wasn’t much time to chat and, as I stepped out of her truck, Donna invited me to call her sometime. It was a polite thing to say, and I never dreamed that this successful engineer would have any interest in a non-traditional, penniless, undergraduate English major. Besides, it sounded as though she had a busy, full life already. After a few lunch dates, a movie, and a short hiking trip, I was telling myself that I wasn’t looking to start a new relationship. I had recently gotten closure on an old relationship and was resolving some major issues in my life. The logic of this, however, took a back seat, and after another few weeks, I had moved into Donna’s place. And even before then, she knew that there was something different about me.

From the beginning of our relationship, Donna noticed that I struggled with how I was presenting myself, how I dressed and, sometimes, how I behaved. During my first Saturday morning laundry ritual in the house, she thought my facial expression changed as I folded my underwear, which was designed for men. “You know,” Donna suggested,

smoothing out a T-shirt on the table, “most butch dykes just wear men’s clothes, they don’t ever talk about it or mentally struggle with how they’re presenting their gender.”

“Well,” I answered, “it’s an issue for me, alright?” I felt the blood rushing into my ears and neck as I put a pair of dark blue socks together. “I’ve just started wearing men’s underwear again, like I did when I was in the army.” My ears began to buzz as soon as the words were out of my mouth.

“Really?” There was a pause as Donna finished folding one T-shirt, picked another one out of the laundry basket, and shook out the wrinkles. “Ever felt like you’re supposed to be a guy?”

I looked at Donna sideways as she continued to fold. “Uh...yeah. Long time ago.” In the few seconds that it took to say those words, I felt a rush of excitement and fear.

“I had a couple of transsexual friends back in the eighties. Both were FtMs—female-to-male. They told me all about how they got injections of testosterone and had Sex Reassignment Surgery. I did some reading about it, too.” She put the shirt in the basket, sat down at the table, and watched me fold.

“I thought only men had surgery to become women. Like that tennis player..what’s her name? Renee Richards.”

“Oh, no. There are lots of FtMs. There just haven’t been any famous ones.”

“So it’s possible,” I mumbled and sat down, shoving the basket of unfolded laundry to the side.

“What? Oh, yeah,” Donna confirmed, “it’s possible, alright.”

The simple mental act of admitting to another person that I thought I was male opened a floodgate of feelings and memories. For a few weeks, it was like riding a roller coaster. Yes, I thought, it was safe to be myself with Donna. I could explore gender identity issues. I could actually live as a male. Then, several days later, I'd shut down, denying all that I'd felt and talked about. Donna was frustrated that I was "flip-flopping" between modes of gender expression and wanted me to land somewhere—anywhere. But, I just couldn't couldn't be transsexual...it was a body image problem...I had "penis envy"...or I was just giving in to old messages about lesbians being sinful. That's it! I was a cross dresser who got off on wearing men's clothes. No—I actually felt that my body wasn't configured right...like when I was a kid...how did I manage to keep that buried so long? What was I going to do about this?

As I came back around to acceptance, the sense of incongruity that re-emerged was disturbing. My body was normal, and well-proportioned, but how could I live with the certainty that I should not have such big breasts, when they were right there, when they were actually part of my body? And why hadn't I grown a penis when I was a kid? It should be there. The outline of it was burned into my brain. *Too much on top, too little on the bottom.* I tried to make a joke of it, but my brain ached from the effort to reconcile its understanding of who I was with the body that it was attached to. No matter how hard I had tried over the years, I hadn't been able to shut this incongruity down. I just couldn't deny who I was any longer. I'd finally have to deal with this head on.

I cried, sitting in a heap on the couch, for what seemed like hours. It was so unfair that anyone should have to experience this. Why was I put in this shitty position? I must be crazy. This can't be happening to me. It can't be real. How can it even be possible?

When I was out of tears, my eyes dry, itchy, and swollen, I laid down on my back. Putting my hands behind my head and staring at the swirling patterns of the textured ceiling, different thoughts and feelings began to surface. This *was* real. This *wasn't* fair. At least now, after all these years, I could possibly do something about it. Wasted years? That didn't matter. I had to deal with now, the present moment. Nothing else had worked. I'd have to do it. I wanted to do it. I wanted to quit playing a role. I wanted to be myself, to have a real life, not a make-believe one. Authenticity could be dangerous. Queers always got beaten up, or worse. Would I be another name on the list? Doesn't matter. I'm sick of being like this. Fuck everybody. I'm going to be who I am. Transition.

Though it seemed to happen all at once, I'd actually come to accept my gender identity over time. A month or so before my rediscovery, I'd begun talking with an intern at the Student Counseling Center. Caleb and I were trying to discover why I'd become so depressed. After talking about a lot of the old family issues that I'd already worked through, I still didn't have a clue about why there seemed to be this great, huge ball of pain inside of me. Now, I'd figured it out.

When I got up the courage to tell the intern what I was experiencing, he surprised me by slapping his knee emphatically and saying, "I knew it! I just knew it from the day you came into my office." After he was done congratulating himself he asked, "So, how would you like to deal with this?"

"I was hoping," I crossed my arms over my chest, "that *you* would have some ideas about that." He looked at me and sat in silence. The clock on the wall behind him ticked loudly as the second hand slowly paced around the dial. It was incorporated into a poster, in

the upper, left-hand corner, where sunlight was just breaking through dark thunderheads.

Tall white letters near the bottom echoed the ancient demand of a Hebrew patriarch,

“Choose this day whom you shall serve...”

Finally, he leaned toward me, stroked his sparse, black goatee, and suggested, “Have you tried wearing lacy underwear? Just as a start?”

My eyes rolled involuntarily and I groaned. “I tried to femme myself out years ago, especially when I was married.”

“Really?” He sat straight up in his chair. “I find that hard to believe.”

“I haven’t always had buzzed hair. I used to wear makeup, high heels—the works. If that had helped, I wouldn’t be here.” I’d quickly reached exasperation. “Is there anyone else here at the center who has experience with gender issues? I think I need to talk with someone who knows about this stuff.”

“My internship here will be up in another few weeks,” Caleb barked, “so you’d have to work with someone else in any case.” He got up and stood behind his desk, shuffling papers. “I’m going into practice at an evangelical health care center. I’ll check with my supervisor and give you a call in a day or two.” Standing up, he added, “And once you’ve worked through the gender issues, you’ll have a lot to square with God, you know.”

I stared at him and then walked out of the office, deciding it wasn’t worth wrangling about professionalism. He was outta here. Fortunately, there did turn out to be a therapist at the center who actually had experience with transgender issues, and I was anxious to find out what she would be like to work with. I only had to wait for a week to find out.

“Hello... Johnny?”

I looked up from Time magazine, a little startled, into the face of a tall, slender woman with tiny rectangular glasses and straight, auburn hair down to her waist. "Uh, yeah," I stammered and stood up to shake the hand that she was offering me.

"I'm Julie Hardin." Julie released my hand and gestured toward the hallway that led out of the reception area at Student Counseling. She headed for her office, inviting, "Come on back."

At the door to her office Julie stopped and ushered me in. She flipped out the little red plastic flag at the top of her door, a sign that she was with a client, and let the door swing shut. As she went to her desk for my file and sat down opposite me, I checked things out. The overhead fluorescents were turned off, and a large lamp in one corner of the room gave out a soft light. A thick area rug was under my feet. Patterned throws hung over the backs of three chairs, arranged in a semi-circle. A wall calendar from an international human rights organization was open to the month of July. Two bookcases helped divide the room into a work area with desk and the area in which we sat. On one shelf of a bookcase was the poem "When I Am Old, I Shall Wear Purple."

"Alright," Julie sighed and settled into her chair. I refocused my attention. On the table to her right was a lamp, a small clock, and a bright copper tray full of smoothly polished worry stones. Milky quartz, deep blue, and mottled green and brown rocks lay on top of the small pile. Julie picked up the green and brown stone and began to work it slowly between her palms. "I've read your file and Caleb's comments, but I'd like for you to tell me how you got to the place you're at, and what you're looking for from me."

"Over the summer, I've been dealing with the fact that I'm really male," I said to my tennis shoes. When I looked up, Julie was nodding. "This isn't just out of the blue. I've

been working on emotional stuff for a lot of years—I'm sure you read that in my file. I don't know...it's been like peeling away layers of an onion. I work on one issue and life gets better, and then I work on something else. I thought I'd covered all of the major stuff, but then—all summer I've been working through a ball of pent-up emotions, mostly sadness, that just seemed to burst last May. I've had these time where I just sit and cry, and rock. Afterwards, I feel wiped out, but relieved, too. Like I've let go of some old crap."

Julie put her worry stone back on its tray and rested her hands in her lap. "Has this been part of your emerging gender identity, or do you think it's unrelated to that?"

"It's all the same thing. The crying jags started about the time I realized that I couldn't stuff my 'maleness' anymore."

"Alright," Julie nodded. "So what would you like for us to work on—specifically?"

"Well," I began, "because I've had to work through a lot of old baggage, and because I spent a month in a psych ward several years ago...well...I'm sure, right now, that I'm male, and want to physically transition to living as a guy, but I want you to help me make sure that I'm not wanting to transition because of any past crap. I want to sort through some things. Besides, I have to have three months of counseling before I can start hormone therapy, anyway."

"Okay," Julie responded, sitting forward with her elbows on her knees, "I'll be happy to work with you. Most of my experience is in substance abuse and eating disorders, but I've counseled a lot of gay men and lesbians, and have had some experience with transgender folks. The issue of transitioning to avoid something is definitely one of the things we need to sort out before you begin working with a medical doctor, so your concern

is reasonable. I do want you to know that, although Gender Identity Disorder is in the DSM...you know what that is, I suspect.”

“The, uh,” I screwed up my face and cocked my head to one side, trying to remember, “the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders?”

“Right. Although the DSM lists GID as a disorder, I don’t pathologize people who are transsexual. In other words, I don’t think that being transsexual means a person is, quote-unquote, sick.”

I was relieved. Having someone pin a DSM diagnosis on me was bad enough, considering our culture’s attitude toward mental illness, but having a therapist who actually bought into that diagnosis would be much worse. I did not want to be pitied and parented, I wanted someone to help me through the transition process. The world was likely to get pretty weird as I navigated through liminal space on my way to living as a male. Now and then a reality check, or at least a second opinion, would be beyond value. And I would need someone to recommend me for hormone therapy and surgery. Physically transitioning is a lengthy process, with checks and balances that often seem like roadblocks all along the way.

These checks and balances, or Standards of Care, were influenced by the observations and recommendations of Harry Benjamin. A well-known endocrinologist and sexologist in New York, Benjamin wrote *The Transsexual Phenomenon* in 1966, the first real piece of medical literature about transsexuals that attempted to be as comprehensive as possible. After working with many transvestites and transsexuals, noting the differences between them, and considering the possible origins of transsexualism that had already been suggested (social, psychological, and physical), Benjamin concluded that the only thing

medical professionals knew for sure was that no form of psychotherapy or counseling ever served to “cure” transsexuals, that attempts at such a cure were unethical and cruel, and that hormone therapy and/or genital reconstruction most often resulted in a happy, productive life. When a group of health professionals concerned with gender identity disorders formed an organization in the 1970s, they named it the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association (HBIGDA) in honor of Benjamin’s work.

The HBIGDA published the first edition of Standards of Care in 1979, about the same time that the American Psychological Association decided to classify transsexualism as Gender Identity Disorder. The fifth and latest edition of the standards was published in 1998, and another major revision is already underway. The standards pretty much boil down to two requirements. The first is that a person who is seeking hormone treatments must have a letter from a licensed therapist, stating that the person has had at least three months of therapy and has been diagnosed with Gender Identity Disorder. The second requirement, for a person who is seeking any type of surgery, is that they have two letters from health professionals, stating a diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder and verifying that the person has lived in the role of the sex they identify as for at least one year. One letter must be from a Ph.D. or M.D. who has specialized in the behavioral sciences, and the other from a licensed therapist or M.D. One of these professionals must have worked with the person for at least six months. Unfortunately, a person can’t rely on their insurance company to help them through this lengthy, expensive process. Even when faced with a diagnosis of a bonafide mental disorder, and certification that a person has met the standards of the medical community for an accepted form of treatment for that disorder, insurance companies refuse to pay for that treatment, claiming that it is cosmetic or elective

rather than medically necessary. Depending on who you're talking to in the health care system, the standards may be received as guidelines, strict requirements, or, in the case of insurance providers, irrelevant.

Most transsexuals see the HBGDA standards as barriers. As I took the next step in my transition, however, I was more concerned about encountering problems that had nothing to do with these standards.

"And what are you here for today?" The medical records clerk asked when I walked up to her check-in counter at the Student Health Center.

I ran my fingers through my rain-soaked hair and slipped out of my dripping jacket. Outside, a September rain was washing away the August dirt and grime. "I'd like a private consultation with Dr. Adams." My voice wavered as I answered.

A confused look crossed the face of the clerk, but she recovered quickly and motioned toward the waiting area.

I shook the leftover raindrops from my jacket and hung it off the back of my chair, wondering if Dr. Adams' nurse would grill me once we got to the examination room. She shouldn't. Donna had reminded me of something I heard long ago, that a person can ask for a private consultation with their doctor, and none of the nurses or support staff are allowed to ask questions. Everything is supposed to be between the patient and doctor. I was worried enough about what he would think, let alone the nurses. Whether it was true or not, most of the nurses at Student Health had the reputation of being xenophobic. Black students and gay students had the most complaints. If the nurses gave *them* grief, I figured that I was really in for it.

Fortunately, I had a bit more confidence in my doctor's professionalism. I'd seen him quite a few times during the last spring semester, after I'd fallen on the ice and had a disc in my back slip out a bit. He seemed like a good guy, and he had the reputation for being one of the best doctors at the center. He actually listened and gave a damn.

"Carol Ann Rogers?" A nurse called.

Damn. Old name. I was already used to being called Johnny.

"Hello," the nurse smiled. I followed her down another hallway. She explained, over her shoulder, "Since you've asked for a consult, I'll just take you to a room. No need to weigh you or get a blood pressure. We can do that later—if it's necessary." She stopped in front of an examining room, and gestured for me to go in. "Have a seat. Dr. Adams should be in to see you in a couple of minutes."

I squirmed in the hard plastic chair, periodically glancing at my watch, for fifteen minutes. Waiting felt like slow torture, but the nurse hadn't questioned me—that was a good omen.

There was a soft knock at the door. "Carol Ann?" Dr. Adams stepped into the room, shook my hand and sat down with my file. "Sorry to keep you waiting. How's your back doing?"

"Fine, now."

"Well, then. What is it that you'd like to talk with me about?"

"Uh," I began, staring at the floor. *You don't get if you don't ask.* I looked back up at Adams. His dark eyes were steady, peering out past bushy black eyebrows and over a matching beard. His expression looked neutral. "I've been talking with a therapist at Student Counseling, working through some stuff. I signed an information release, in case

you need to talk with her. I, uh, I'm, transsexual. I want to, uh, transition to living as a man...physically, I mean. Could you give me a referral to an endocrinologist?" There. I'd done it.

Adams's expression hadn't changed, but he was taking way too long to respond. Finally, an emotion registered on his face: surprise. He sat back in his chair and let his arms fall to his sides. "Well, I'll say that I'm certainly surprised, and that I don't know much about transsexualism, but I'm willing to give you a referral. Now, you need to realize that I will have to talk with your counselor, and that it may take a while to find someone who has experience..."

"That's okay. I have to have a minimum of three months of counseling before anyone will see me about it, anyway.

"Well, then, right now, I'd like to know a little more about how you came to this decision...uh, how you feel like you're a man trapped in a woman's body. They don't talk much about this in med school, as you might imagine." Adams flashed me a grin and I relaxed.

We talked for about fifteen minutes, and a week later I had a referral to a Dr. Kelly at the University of Iowa. Now all I needed was to give my therapist the name and address of the doctor, so that she could get the obligatory letter of recommendation in the mail to him. And then I'd have to wait until October to talk with him. I could just handle the eight week delay. The process was a slow one, but at least things were moving along. I would soon discover that, for one person, they seemed to be moving plenty fast.

“Hey,” I called to Donna as I came in the door after class. “You’re home early; it’s not quite four o’clock.”

She was kicked back in her recliner, papers spread out over her lap. The cat was trying to creep stealthily onto the papers and Donna reached to put her down on the floor as she answered, “I’ve got this journal article that has to be edited and in the mail by tomorrow morning. People kept bothering me in my office, so I just locked up and came home.” Setting down her papers, she asked, “How was your session with Julie? You talked with her this afternoon, right?”

“Good. She gave me a copy of the letter of recommendation she wrote for Dr. Kelly, the endocrinologist that I see next week. Standard stuff, not exactly exciting reading, but it says what it needs to say.” Reaching into my backpack, I pulled out the letter and unfolded it. “Lifetime experience of feeling male, Gender Identity Disorder as defined by the DSM...yaddah, yaddah, yaddah.”

“Oh.” Donna picked up her papers again and furrowed her brow.

“Something wrong?”

“Uh, no,” Donna answered. “I’m just preoccupied with this damn article.”

“Okay, I’ll leave you to it and get dinner started.”

I went to the kitchen and nothing else was said that evening. Throughout the next week, Donna seemed irritable, and was always picking fights with me over the stupidest things. I realized that she must be worried about my trip to the endocrinologist. I wondered what had happened to the great enthusiasm she originally had for my transition. I didn’t ask her. Maybe she didn’t know, herself. We’d both find out soon enough.

The University of Iowa Hospital and Clinics is an amazing sight. It's a hodge-podge of four or five large buildings, at odd angles, of different architectural styles, that have somehow been connected to one another. The entrance is marked by a large, beautiful fountain, and is guarded by multi-storied parking ramps.

Inside, the clerk at the registration desk gave me a file and directions to my doctor's clinic.

"Sure you remember which way to go?" Donna asked as we wended our way through a maze of first-floor hallways. Each clinic seemed to have a different color associated with it. The carpet changed from blue, to red, to green.

I was just beginning to feel totally disoriented, when the carpet became purple and we arrived at the right clinic. "Here it is," I answered.

After checking in at the desk, I sat down next to Donna, who was already reading the book she'd brought along, and filled out a short questionnaire about my medical history. Once that was done I glanced around at the other people in the waiting room. There was something about all of them...they were similar, somehow.

"I'm doing much better," a thin voice said off to our left. "I'm even working again. Can't afford a place to stay, though, 'til I get my first paycheck. They cut off my aid once I got a job. I'm kind of stuck." Only the back of the man and the nurse he was speaking with were visible. The nurse wrote something on a piece of paper, handed it to the man, and whispered to him a while before going back to the examination area.

As he got up and walked out of the clinic, I realized what it was about the people in the room that had caught my attention. They were mostly men in their thirties and forties,

with gaunt faces, skinny frames, and tired eyes. Most were alone. Many had dry, rattling coughs. They were HIV positive or had AIDS.

Doctors cannot yet offer a cure to patients who have AIDS or guarantee that drugs will keep HIV at bay for the rest of their lives. However difficult and expensive, there was an effective treatment plan available to me. I relaxed, just a bit, but the faces of the men around me were a reminder of uncertainty, of my own hopes and fears, of the fact that I'd need drug therapy for the rest of my life.

The rest of my life. Yesterday, just getting to the hospital had seemed to take a lifetime.

"Can we stop at the Kwik Mart before we leave town? I need something to drink on this trip," Donna told me.

"No problem," I answered, and turned her bright red Chevy Silverado into the cramped parking lot of a convenience store.

Donna wasn't gone long. She hopped back into the truck and I looked over my right shoulder before I shifted into reverse and put my foot on the gas. Suddenly, a loud, slow "screeeeeeech" made me slam on the brakes. A glance over my other shoulder told me that I hadn't quite missed the telephone pole that straddled the street and the parking area.

This was not a good omen. Donna's jaw was clamped tight and twitching, and she was staring straight ahead. Putting the Chevy in neutral, I rested my forehead on the steering wheel and groaned.

"Well," Donna asked in a clipped voice, "aren't you going to see how bad it is?"

I slid out of the front seat and stared at the back of the truck. A long, deep, silvery scar ran from the tailgate to the wheel well.

After I reported the damage, offered to let Donna drive, and had apologized for the tenth time, I got back behind the wheel again. I drove in silence. At some point, Donna reached over and put her hand on mine, which was resting on the seat. A little maze of red taillights was spread out on the highway before me and the sun was sinking in the rear-view mirror.

This was nearly a three-hour drive, so I had plenty of time to think about my early morning appointment with the endocrinologist at the University of Iowa Hospital, to agonize over the possible outcomes of the visit. I was under no illusion that I would walk out of there with a prescription for testosterone. Sometimes a doctor wouldn't agree with the diagnosis of a therapist and general practitioner, and would send a patient away. More often, they ran a bunch of blood tests and then asked you to come back when the results were in. I had had to wait eight weeks to see this guy—how much longer would I have to wait to get results and have a chance to begin hormone therapy? I wondered how much longer I would be able to handle living as a female, now that I was so in touch with my mind and body. Would they require me to come to the hospital twice a month for injections, or would I be able to have the student health center at my university administer them? What if I had a medical condition that made it dangerous for me to take hormones? Would the staff at the hospital call me Johnny, even though my name hadn't yet been legally changed? Like a hamster on an exercise wheel, the worries kept spinning around in my mind until we pulled up at the motel, and continued long into a sleepless night.

“Johnny Rogers,” a nurse called. Glancing up at the clock on the wall, I realized that I’d been people watching, ruminating, and zoning out for nearly an hour.

Donna lowered the book she’d been reading. “Bout time,” she commented dryly, and in a thinner voice, “Luck.”

I spent another forty-five minutes in an examination room, staring at mint green walls. My palms sweated.

“Hey, we’re having a chair sale here today.” The tall, dark-haired man in a white lab coat chuckled as he struggled to get past the chair that had been propping open the door to the room. “The fire alarm in this section of the hospital went off this morning, all the fire doors closed, and now we have to prop them open until someone resets them.” The door clicked shut as he offered his hand, “I’m Jim Kelly.” My sweaty palm must have been a cue. As he sat down and opened my chart, he spun around in the chair to face me and add, “Let me put you at ease right away. I’ve been doing this for over ten years now, so it’s no big deal.”

Endocrinologists are experts in all things hormonal, and this doctor had the most experience with transsexual patients of anyone in the state. His experience could come in handy if any problems cropped up, and he was used to writing letters for people to take to their school or place of employment, stating that, yes, indeed, his patient was physically transitioning, and that, yes, it was perfectly safe and appropriate for them to be using a different bathroom than they had been using.

“You’ve come better prepared than most people,” Kelly said, flipping through the medical history my general practitioner had forwarded and pulling out the letter from my

therapist. "So," he turned to me, "tell me about your experience... a little bit about your life. Have you always felt that you're male?"

We discussed my childhood experiences, my time in the army, and the issues I'd sorted through with my therapist. I told him that I was certain I wanted to live as a male.

Kelly finally began to scribble on a piece of paper. "I believe that you're an appropriate candidate for hormone therapy. Of course, we'll have to do several blood tests before you leave today. I assume that you've done some reading about the effects of testosterone. Do you have any questions for me?"

"I know that my voice will change, but how long will that take?"

"We can't be sure." He looked down and toyed with his gold-plated Parker pen. It flashed dully in the fluorescent light. "Everyone responds differently. Your voice will probably begin to deepen in about two or three months... about the same time you stop menstruating. You might be a bit irritable and," Kelly looked back up at me, "the mild acne you have will probably get worse for a while."

I grimaced thoughtfully. "What about going bald?"

"Huh," Kelly smiled, put his pen down, and leaned back in his chair. "If male pattern baldness runs in your family, you've probably got that to look forward to, as well, but there's no way to be sure. We just don't know enough to be able to say what will happen, or when it will happen to each individual."

So it was going to be an adventure. I did want to know one thing for sure. "Well, I guess the most important question I have is about the risks."

"There are several problems associated with testosterone in tablet form," Kelly leaned forward as he explained. "The process used to make the tablet changes the chemical

composition of the hormone to the extent that it can cause serious liver damage. The injectable form is much safer. Now, it *can* cause the blood to thicken up, so you would want to tell someone if you began to feel sluggish. You could stroke out. That's fairly rare, though."

The risks seemed acceptable to me, and I had been warned that testosterone came in injections, so I wasn't too surprised at this news. What blew me away were my doctor's parting words.

"You'll need to get these scripts filled at the pharmacy, then come back to the office after lunch so a nurse can show you how to inject yourself properly. I'll need to see you again in three months for more blood tests."

I stared at the papers he put into my hand. *Needles, BD, 22 gauge, 1 inch*. Shit! I'm taking them home with me! "Whoa, I thought I'd have to have a nurse give me these shots."

"Well, this is a big decision you've made, and I think that you need take responsibility for it from the very start."

We stood and shook hands. I made my way to the technicians who took the blood samples. *More* needles. Then, cotton ball attached to the bend in my arm, I headed back to where Donna was sitting. My arms hung limply at my sides.

"Well? Don't just stand there! What did he say?" she asked breathlessly.

Like someone coming out of a trance, I slowly answered, "He gave me needles. I've got to get the prescription and then come back after lunch to have someone show me how to inject myself."

Donna sat upright in her chair and looked more surprised than I felt. "He's just giving you the stuff? I can't believe it!"

On the way back through the corridors, Donna explained how the FtMs she'd known in the '80s were required to attend gender clinics, where everything was tightly controlled, from the administration of hormone injections to the very way that clients walked, talked, and dressed. Group therapy sessions were set up to make sure that everyone learned to be a stereotypical, heterosexual man. Some trans men resisted what they saw as yet another attempt to mold them into someone they were not, and either played along until they had transitioned, or walked away in despair. I had already learned that others, like Lou G. Sullivan, the founder of the educational and support organization FTM International, sought psychologists and physicians who would be willing to help them transition outside of the negative environment of these clinics. I was benefiting from these men's efforts.

Arriving at the hospital cafeteria, we slowly shuffled through a long line of people. The small, gray-haired woman ahead of me picked up a bowl of orange Jell-O with marshmallows, peered closely, and then thought better of it, quickly replacing the bowl on its bed of crushed ice. Donna telegraphed her curiosity. I could feel her and her questions shuffling along behind me.

We paid for our food and found a table. I filled her in on my conversation with the doctor. "He said that I can expect menopause-like symptoms as the testosterone begins to compete with the estrogen in my body, and I'll have more acne breakouts. My libido will probably skyrocket, too."

"Great," Donna groaned as she bit into her toasted cheese sandwich.

Around us, plates clattered and people spoke in hushed voices. One of the servers on the line yelled into the kitchen, requesting more rice.

Unsure of whether she had commented on the cheese sandwich or my impending libido, I continued talking. “It’ll take three to six months for my voice to get deeper and for body hair to start growing.” I lowered my voice and leaned across the table to add, “He says that my clitoris will grow between three quarters of an inch to two inches long. They can’t say exactly when and how much things will change, because they don’t have any good studies on FtMs. He’s asked if I’d be willing to take pictures of my face and genitals every two weeks...don’t know about that.”

“Don’t blame you.”

I sat back, deep into my chair, and we munched potato chips in silence. A tired voice from the table next to ours called, “Come on, Mother. Let’s go see if she’s up and around.” As he stood up, I could see that the speaker was a large, stooped-over man in immaculate blue and gray-striped overalls. Long, white hair flowed out from under a green John Deere cap. He helped a tiny, wizened old woman straighten up and amble toward the exit.

I gestured in the direction of the couple. “Guess we’d better get moving, too. It’s after 1:30.”

A few minutes later I was back in the clinic, box of syringes and amber vial in hand.

“You hold the needle like this, with the beveled edge up,” the gruff, gray-haired nurse explained. The syringe looked tiny in her huge, steady hands.

My own hands shook, and I felt light-headed as I filled the syringe, flicked the little bubbles to the top with an index finger, and pushed them out through the inch-long needle. With a sort of push/toss motion used for throwing a dart, I got the needle into my thigh.

Just as I began to wonder if I was dreaming all of this, the nurse took hold of the syringe, pushed the needle further into me, and growled, "You've gotta keep it all the way in."

My stomach flip-flopped and I swallowed hard.

"Now, aspirate for blood."

No red stuff came into the syringe as I pulled back on the plunger, so I had the go ahead to slowly push the thick liquid into my leg. What kind of oil was this stuff suspended in, sesame or 10W 40? My hands were shaking more than ever. It was really starting to hurt now.

"Do you think you'll be able to do this at home?" the nurse asked skeptically as I pulled the needle out and broke it off in the red plastic biohazard container on the desk.

"I'll get used to it," I replied weakly and took the Band-Aid she offered.

With a large, white paper bag full of needles and testosterone tucked under my arm, I walked unsteadily into the waiting room. Donna stood up.

"Done?" she asked.

"Yeah. Let's go."

Donna and I walked slowly out to the parking structure and climbed into the Chevy without a word. My leg was still hurting. I put the bag with the vial and the syringes behind the seat and started up the engine. The numbness was beginning to wear off, and a different feeling slowly began to replace it. It reminded me of the feeling I got whenever I left home on a trip of some kind; there was a mixture of anxiety and excitement as home disappeared

in the rear-view mirror, or as the plane taxied out onto the runway. It was that emotional space between leaving one place and being on the way to another.

As we pulled out of the parking structure, Donna broke the silence to say, “I’m not ready for the road, yet.”

We drove toward a grocery store that I’d seen on the way into town, and found a place that sold ice cream, nearby. We ate in silence, and then headed for the interstate.

Out on the highway, traffic through a large construction zone slowed to a crawl. *Only two seasons in Iowa—winter and road construction.* Donna leaned up against her window and slept. Thunder rumbled, and I watched as small hail began to ping off of the hood.

Making the mental shift from expecting medical professionals to ignore, stall, or otherwise keep me from transitioning didn’t take long. I was excited and relieved to begin hormone therapy, and felt as though the changes couldn’t take place fast enough. Donna and others had a different reaction. Changes were happening too fast for them. I discovered this when Donna came home from work one day, about a week after our trip to Iowa City.

“Hey,” I greeted Donna as she came in the kitchen door. I was chopping vegetables for a stir-fry. “How’d your day go?” A chunk of carrot skittered out from under my knife and onto the floor. Donna picked it up and threw it in the sink before hanging her courier bag on a hook by the door and leaning on the edge of the counter.

“I had lunch with Barb, and she really shook me up. When I met her at her office, well, I just said hello and she started waving her arms and yelling.” Donna mimicked Barb’s high voice and lilting speech, “‘If it were my partner, I’d feel angry—no, *betrayed!*”

What about Multiple Personality Disorder? I've heard that it can take years to rule that out as a possibility! And Carol Ann's not very stable. Your relationship is the third one she's had in the past year, you know.' It really shook me up. She was so angry. I thought that she'd be supportive of *me*, at least."

"Jeez, and where'd she get off on saying that I've had three relationships? Genie's the only one I dated before I met you...the only other person I've dated in the last few years."

"It doesn't matter. I think she's got a point. Everything's all mixed up. Everything's going way too fast for me. It's all just come out of the blue."

"What...out of the blue?" I stopped chopping carrots, set down the knife, and turned around to face her. "But you were so excited. You noticed my gender struggles from the very beginning. You told me what you knew about transitioning. You were the one who helped me pick out clothes, and..."

"Did you ever stop to think how I knew all that stuff?" Donna asked in exasperation.

"No! You said you had trans friends..."

"Sure, I had a couple of friends who transitioned, but I learned a lot first hand. It was because of those friends that I explored gender identity issues myself...reading books, talking with a counselor. I suppose I could have gone on to be approved for hormone therapy, but there's no way I would have seriously considered it."

My jaw dropped open. Donna continued to deliver her revelation.

"I guess I thought you'd be like me. You'd explore gender expression and then decide that you were okay with being a lesbian, that you were strong enough to deal with your, uh, *dysphoria*." She took a few steps into the living room, sat down hard on the couch,

and began to sob her words out in gasps, “I never dreamed you’d actually go through with it. How could you do this? You’ve only lived as a lesbian for a few years...you haven’t even given it a chance. When I met you, I thought I’d found the perfect woman, a proud, confident lesbian.” Donna clenched her jaw along with her fists. Looking up at me with tears streaming down her face, she ground out, “Did you know about this when I met you? You lied to me!”

She stared at the floor and I stepped closer to her, not knowing what to think, let alone say.

Suddenly, Donna softened up again and took my hands in hers. “Please, stop this...I’m *begging* you. You don’t have to do this.”

I looked at her in disbelief. “Yes, I *do* have to do this.” She let go of my hands. “And,” my voice rose as I began to shake with anger, “you lied to *me*, making me think you’d support my transition... I don’t know how you could go through gender exploration and then just walk away. You can’t possibly have any idea what it’s like to be transsexual.”

Donna wiped her eyes with her hands, stood up, and responded, “All I can say is, if you loved me, you’d stop this right now! And you can be damned sure that I’m not going to pay for any of it!”

How could she be serious? Especially after years of her parents giving her crap for being a lesbian. “I haven’t even hinted that you should pay for anything! This is something I have to do...and it doesn’t mean I don’t love you.”

“You’d rather transition than stay with me!”

“I don’t think I can be *sane* if I don’t transition! I have to do this for me, or I won’t be worth shit for you or anyone else. I spent years trying to be someone that other people

told me I should be...I can't do that anymore, live a lie. Can't you relate to that? I want to live my own life. I just want to be myself."

Looking back, I think that was the hell of it, for Donna. She did know what it was like to be a person who wasn't accepted for who she was. Her Roman Catholic parents had always been troubled by her masculine behavior and dress, and would not accept her as a lesbian. Her youngest sister spouted fundamentalist Christian doctrine at Donna whenever she got the chance, and continually gave her extremely feminine clothing for birthdays and holidays. And then there were the general challenges of growing up as a lesbian in the 60s and 70s. Old messages about acceptable gender expression seemed to plague her. During the months following our trip to see my endocrinologist, she began to wear more traditionally feminine clothing and nail polish, and carried a purse. This was totally out of character, as far as I could tell, but I shook it off. I reasoned that my gender identity work had simply kicked off a reassessment of her own.

The response of Donna's mother and sister, who lived in the area, also had an effect. Instead of being upset that Donna was living with a transsexual, they were thrilled that she was finally living with a man.

"Shit," Donna had said as she got off of the phone one night, "my mother thinks you're a fucking answer to prayer."

I chuckled tentatively from my place in front of the television. "Isn't that good? I mean, all things considered?"

"Do you know how many years I wanted my parents to love and accept me for who I am, and now, because of your transition, my mother and sister suddenly find me acceptable? It's all fucking ripping me apart inside. And like an idiot I've been trying to be acceptable."

She grabbed at the front of her pink, flowered, rayon blouse and explained, “Blouses, nail polish. It’s what I thought all of you wanted—that I had to be femme, now that you’re becoming a guy. You always talk about wanting to be accepted, but what about me?”

“But,” I blurted, “I never expected you to change!”

“You’ve asked for a lot,” she yelled. “And you’ve started to think of nothing but sex...”

“What?”

“I can’t even hug you without your wanting to initiate sex—and I don’t want to hear about the effects of testosterone. It’s confusing to have sex with you, anyway—and besides, if we were still a lesbian couple, the sex would be cooling off by now. Most lesbians, hell, most women just don’t think sex is all that important.” Her hands were on her hips and her face was red.

“You’ve known an entirely different group of women than I have, apparently,” I countered, not wanting to hear the remark about sex with me being confusing. “And since when did hugging, kissing, and getting turned on have to be followed by sex? What’s the real issue, here?”

“God, I hate it when you do this to me! Just like a man to act logical and reserved while the hysterical woman flies off the handle. It’s maddening, and I’ll bet you know it.”

“Look, I don’t want to argue. And I certainly don’t want to take any cheap shots.” I was tired of the accusations, innuendo, and hostility in the house. That’s why I seemed so cool. I was tired of hurting. Period. I wanted to talk politely and reason it all away.

“Oh, so I’m taking cheap shots, now, am I?”

“I didn’t say that...”

“You didn’t have to,” Donna screamed, tears beginning to run down her cheeks.

“Well, I can’t deal with this. I’m just going to bed.” Her sobbing receded into her bedroom.

I turned off the TV, took the dogs for a walk, and went to bed, wondering when these emotional ambushes would end. They contrasted so sharply with the times when she would say that she wanted us to stay together, but needed time to work through all of the changes that were going on in our lives and relationship. I wanted to give her time, but I also wished that she could share the joy I felt about becoming myself, share the unfolding of life, mine and ours. While she was angrily accusing me of imposing my maleness on her, I felt that I was actively squashing my masculinity and joy so that we could get along. The frustration and other emotions we both experienced went underground, emerging as petty arguments from me and snide remarks about men from Donna. We had already stopped having sex, and now began to do fewer and fewer things together. Of course, we hardly ever spoke about anything related to my transition. Nothing was getting resolved. We were just plodding along through daily life. The thoughts and feelings all had to break loose again, sometime.

OFF THE TOP

I had asked my endocrinologist, about five months into my transition, if he knew of anyone in the state who had experience doing FtM breast reduction surgery. He immediately came up with the name of Dr. Drake, a plastic surgeon who worked in Des Moines. I e-mailed Dr. Drake that same day, introducing myself and asking if he would consider performing surgery on me. He responded after a few days, saying that he would certainly be willing to see me and discuss it. Two months later, we spoke face to face.

Drake was a shaggy, gray bear of a man. "I wouldn't be comfortable doing this type of surgery on a regular basis," he growled softly, peering at me through the top of his glasses, "because we don't have a comprehensive program for evaluation and support of transsexuals here in Iowa, but I received the letter from your therapist and spoke with Dr. Kelly, so I'm willing to discuss the procedure with you."

I had read about and seen pictures of guys who had had subcutaneous mastectomies, and that's what I was going for. Because I was barely a B cup and didn't have large nipples, there wasn't too much material to remove. Chances were good that I would retain nipple sensation and have a very natural, unscarred appearance. Guys with larger breasts have to have their chests completely reconstructed, which involves large incisions as well as removal and replacement of the nipples. The result is often a very well sculpted, but visibly scarred and numb chest.

Drake and I chatted for a bit about my experience of being transsexual and about how my transition was going. He also asked, "Why are you interested in the subcutaneous procedure?"

“Well, I just might be able to afford it,” I told him, “and it’s the least invasive or radical procedure. My goal is to have the least amount of surgery necessary to be comfortable with my body. I don’t hate my body, I just want it to be configured like my brain knows it should be.” Drake nodded and asked me to remove my shirt while he stepped out to talk with another patient.

After I’d taken off my oxford and under-shirt, and unwrapped the ace bandage that held down my breasts, Drake returned. He looked at my chest and began to explain the surgery to me. “It is done under general anesthesia. I make a u-shaped incision around the nipple area,” he said, tracing the incision on my breast with the index finger of his gloved hand. “Then, with an instrument called a canula, that scrapes and provides suction, I remove the excess fat and tissue.” He interrupted himself by asking me to raise my arms as though I were showing off my pectorals. The pose reminded me of Lou Ferrigno as an angered Incredible Hulk. “Good,” Drake mumbled, patting and pulling on my pects. He backed up a step and motioned for me to put my arms down. “Finally, I insert drains through small incisions under each arm, to prevent edema, and then put you in a pressure vest. After about five days the drains come out, but the vest has to be worn quite a while longer.” Drake paused a moment and asked, “Do you have any questions?”

I didn’t. Everything he said matched what I had read about the surgery. The only thing left to consider was scheduling and finances. I had been, officially, in transition for about seven months. The spring semester was coming to an end, and I wasn’t in the best of health, coming down with a cold or sinus infection every month, it seemed. I’d have to charge a few thousand dollars on my credit cards to pay for the procedure. While I weighed my options and responsibilities, and finished out the semester, my body was being attacked

by mononucleosis. A high fever, extreme fatigue, and a swollen throat with white fungus on it made the decision for me: I'd have to wait a year to have a mastectomy, when I had figured out the financing, recovered my health, and finished up my bachelor's degree.

Donna was happy that my surgery had been delayed. Our relationship seemed more comfortable through the summer months, but conflict was still close to the surface. Arguments would become more common as the fall semester progressed and I neared the one year anniversary of the beginning of my transition.

The alarm went off and I reached over to hit the snooze button. Myopic vision registered a fuzzy 7:00. Donna was still sleeping as I pried myself out of the bed. After cleaning up, shaving, and getting dressed, I headed for the kitchen. There I stood, with a cabinet door half-open and my brain still half asleep.

"You're up early."

Startled back into consciousness by the arrival of Donna, I grunted and grabbed a cereal box. She fired up the coffee maker as I poured corn flakes and wandered into the living room to eat. Donna followed me after a bit and sat down on the couch next to me. In between sips of coffee she asked, "Are you mad at me?"

"Wha?" I slurred through a mouthful of flakes.

"You seem to be angry with me for some reason." She kept sipping, peering at me over the edge of her cup.

I swallowed. "Just trying to wake up and get going here. Why do you think I'm mad at you?"

"I don't know. You just seem grumpy this morning...and you didn't start the coffee maker. I just figured you were mad at me.

No coffee equals anger? "I'm kind of in a hurry. I've got to drive to Iowa City to see Dr. Kelly, remember?"

"Oh," Donna replied flatly as she put down her coffee mug.

Her next words hit me mid-air, as I got up to return my empty cereal bowl to the kitchen. "Well, you know, you left the toilet seat up yesterday. Then, when you didn't make coffee, I just had to wonder...does this mean, now that you're living as a man, that you're not going to do anything around the house anymore and become a regular jerk?"

Where the hell did that come from? "I must've left the seat up after I cleaned the damn thing!" I yelled. "Jesus, I'm still doing most of the cooking and cleaning around here. I can't believe you're coming up with this sort of shit now!" As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I realized what was happening. Every time that I took another major step in my transition, which usually coincided with a trip to see a doctor, Donna would come unhinged—arguing and, eventually, crying. This particular trip involved a visit to my endocrinologist, who would draw blood and ask how I was feeling. It was no big deal, from my point of view, but Donna seemed to avoid dealing with her feelings until I went to the doctor. Suddenly, at these times, my transition became undeniable for her.

"This has been hard for me," she said, tears rolling down her cheeks.

We stared blankly at each other, and then at the living room walls. Donna continued to cry. In my mind, I could replay some of her litany of pain, grief, and loss, a litany that I'd learned during other exchanges. Just thinking about them made me wince. It always began with *I miss Carol Ann*. I loved Donna and was doing my best to be compassionate as she

experienced loss and went through the stages of grief. The process was painful for me, too, and seemed to be going on far too long. I hated conflict, but I suddenly began to run out of patience.

“I know that it’s been difficult for you, and I’ve tried hard to be patient—it’s just that, I thought that you would have worked through some of this stuff by now. How can we ever live together if you don’t get past this? Do you still even *want* to be my partner?” Silence. I glanced at the clock. “Man, I’ve gotta leave or I’ll miss my appointment.”

In between the stony silences, exchanges like this one occurred frequently over winter. Donna was anything but thrilled in March when I told her that I’d scheduled surgery for the week after commencement.

“But you didn’t check with me first,” Donna complained. “I mean, what if my schedule conflicts with the surgery? And what about finances?”

“I told you that I was planning to do this. And it’s not easy getting surgery scheduled, you know. It seemed to make sense to get a date, and then to talk about it. Besides, the earlier I get this done, the more time I have to recover before I start my graduate program and begin teaching English in the fall. And as far as money goes, I’ll have just enough to cover bills until August. I’ve thought this through.” In fact, I’d even planned for the possibility that Donna would refuse to have anything to do with my surgery or recovery.

Donna, apparently, had never entertained the idea that I would actually have surgery, but she agreed to take a day and a half off to make sure that I got to and from the hospital. And she was right about money being a problem. I had great credit, but I was nervous about

charging so large an amount on a credit card. It would take me a while to pay it off, even if I managed to snag one of the many credit card promos that came through the mail, offering to transfer a balance to a lower-interest account. And there were steadily mounting student loans, as well as my contribution to the household expenses. I just had to have faith that everything would work out.

The day before my surgery, Donna and I drove down to Des Moines in the late afternoon. I met with my doctor, had several blood tests, and checked in with the Outpatient Surgery folks.

"Alright," the anesthesiologist asked without looking up, "have you ever had trouble with anesthesia before? Nausea, trouble waking up, anything like that?"

"Oh, yeah. I had knee surgery when I was sixteen, and again at eighteen, and both times I threw up a lot. The second time around I spent a lot of time in recovery and had a screaming headache for two days."

"When was that? What year?" His pen scribbled over the paper on his clipboard.

"Early eighties."

"Hmm. The drugs we're using now are much better than they were back then. You shouldn't have a problem, but I'll make a notation here that you should be given something for nausea." He finally looked up at me and, without letting go of his pen, combed his black hair out of his eyes with his right hand. "Do you know Professor McCloskey?"

Many Iowans had heard about the former University of Iowa Economics professor who transitioned from male to female a couple of years before I had begun my own

transition. The news had been plastered all over the major newspapers in the state, and McCloskey had done many speaking gigs, during one of which I met her. While she'd been fairly well received as a woman, a few people hadn't approved of the way in which she had come out—to both her family and the public. Apprehensive of where this was going, I answered, “Yes, I do.”

“I just want to tell you, sir, that I think you have a lot of courage, and I admire you for sticking to your convictions!” I looked around for Alan Funt and his *Candid Camera* crew, but the guy was sincere. “Good luck to you.”

He had gotten up and was holding out his hand. Mechanically, I stood and shook it. “Thank you very much.”

Donna and I left the hospital and hardly spoke over an early dinner. Back in the motel room, sleep didn't come any more easily than conversation had. I didn't know what was going on in Donna's head, and I'd always had the lingering fear that I might go into surgery and never wake up from it. On the other hand, I was eager to finally have the surgery done, and wondered what my chest would look like. I wished that Donna could be excited with me. Some time after one o'clock, my fear and anticipation were overtaken by sleep. At five-thirty in the morning Donna and I quietly got into the car and drove to the hospital. I invited her to stay with me until I was called into the operating room, but there still didn't seem to be much to say. I felt very much alone, even though, as I shuffled out of the prep room in my paper slippers, she kissed my cheek and said, “I hope everything goes smoothly. I'll be out here waiting for you.”

Beep!

“Hey, Johnny! You need to wake up, hon. You have to breathe, Johnny. Do you hear that beep? That’s the machine telling you that you need to breathe.”

The nurse and her expensive alarm clock were interrupting the best rest I’d had in ages. Oh, and I vaguely remember someone yanking a tube out of my nose. How can a guy get any sleep around here?

“Johnny, do you want me to go get your friend?” The voice was like sandpaper, but the tone was motherly.

“Yeah,” I said with a slowly growing sense that I had just had surgery.

Beep!

Maybe I could get her to breathe for me. It was hard to remember to breathe, but something told me it was important that I try. I had the sense that I should be worried about something.

Beep!

“Hey, there. You’re finally coming around.”

I looked up into a fuzzy version of my surgeon’s round, confidence-inspiring face and asked, “How’d it go?”

“Oh, very well. I had to put drains in because it looks as though there’ll be a lot of fluid. And we did find several small fibroid tumors, but they all seem to be benign. I’ve spoken with Donna. She should be joining you soon.”

Beep!

“Johnny, it’s me,” Donna’s voice said. “You need to breathe.”

“I know. ‘S hard. Glad sh’ gotcha.”

“I was getting a little worried. Dr. Drake came by about an hour ago to say you’d be out of recovery soon. But here you are.”

Beep!

“Come on now, you have to breathe. In, out, in, out!” Donna encouraged, raising and lowering her arms in an attempt to be humorous.

I smiled and groaned. Things around me were beginning to take shape. The fog in my brain should have burned off long ago from the intense lighting of the recovery room. It was blinding. My nurse bustled past and then made a U-turn.

“Well, welcome back. You had us worried. Do you remember me shaking your shoulders to wake you?”

“Sheez, no.” She’d been *shaking* me? Did I almost not wake up, as in, permanently?

“Well, you should be fine, now. In a minute or two I’ll unhook you from all the monitors and sit you up in a chair, over there, and we’ll give you your post-op instructions.”

Donna and I exchanged a weak smile.

Maybe it wasn’t such a great idea to have scheduled my mastectomy for the Wednesday after graduation. Really, though, I felt as though I couldn’t have waited any longer. My brain had seemed to be on the verge of a meltdown every time I looked at my chest or caught a reflection of my naked self in a mirror—I had even been opening the medicine cabinet in the bathroom when I took a shower so that I wouldn’t have to see my body as I stepped out to dry off. But I didn’t have to see my breasts to be reminded that they were too large, that they weren’t male breasts. Bound or not, they would bounce with every

step, keeping me painfully aware of that baffling, uncomfortable sense of incongruity. So I kept bargaining with myself all year long, reasoning that there was no way to have surgery in the middle of the school year. I focused on getting my bachelor's degree. Now that I had it and was looking at working on a master's degree, there was further incentive. I didn't know how I could deal with the usual difficulty of being a novice college instructor, teaching in front of twenty-five students with bound breasts that my brain told me shouldn't be there. I was grateful that I wouldn't have to try.

"Alright, Johnny," my nurse said as she reappeared. She'd moved me to a huge reclining chair in post-op, about fifty feet from the bed I'd been in. I was now awake enough to notice that she wore a very round pair of glasses, had a smile that turned down at the corners, and moved in a swift, deliberate, humming bird sort of way. "I've got your post-op instructions, here. Let's get you out of that gown and into your clothes." She pulled a curtain around the chair. "You can put your shirt on, just don't button it."

Donna handed me the loose-fitting pair of shorts and old, oversized button-down shirt that I'd brought with me. The shirt was so large that I didn't have too much trouble getting my arms into it. Donna tied my tennis-shoes.

When the nurse came back, she started in with the instructions. "The doctors put a compression vest on you after surgery. It helps prevent bleeding and keeps the swelling down. It's a lot like a sports bra, with this zipper down the middle. You can see that they also put drains in your chest."

Clear tubes came out of the bottom of the white elastic compression vest, on either side, and snaked back up to it, ending in lemon-sized bulbs that were safety pinned to the

fabric. The bulbs had some disgusting, reddish-brown fluid in them. The vest was straining to hold down my swollen mass of a chest.

“The bulbs will fill up with fluid. Today and tomorrow, they may fill up pretty quickly. You’ll need to empty them three times a day or when they’ve filled up. Record the amount of fluid each time you empty them.”

This nurse was methodical.

“When the fluid drops below 15cc, the drains can come out. You’ll want to call your surgeon at that point.”

The nurse went over the proper procedure for changing my bandages. She then told me about the medications my surgeon prescribed (antibiotics, a morphine-like drug, and a laxative to counteract the plugging action of the painkiller), handed me a follow-up appointment card, and set a half-gallon size bucket (with lid) in my lap. I signed a statement that I understood all of the instructions she’d given me and thanked her for the puking pail. I was free to go.

I was wheeled downstairs and helped into Donna’s minivan. The seats had been removed and there was room for me to lie flat on my back. Staring up at the gray, fuzzy roof, my world began to swirl, so I closed my eyes, wishing I’d brought another pillow.

“You alright back there?” Donna called over her shoulder as we rolled down the highway. “Wanna make sure you’re doing okay.”

I blinked awake and realized that I must have fallen asleep after closing my eyes. “Yep. Glad you got rid of the truck...I don’t know if I could make this trip sitting up.” The drive to Ames took an hour, and the interstate had some very rough stretches. I could hear a low, rhythmic thunk, thunk, thunk. The van bounced as it rode the rumpled, wavy

ridges created by the weight of countless eighteen wheelers. Even with the morphine, I ached, and small jabs of pain zinged through my chest with each thunk. “Prob’ly be worse if I tried it tomorrow. ‘Least now I can sleep. Can’t help it. Wild dreams, too, when I close my eyes.”

“Well, that’s the morphine. You just relax back there. I’ll get you home as soon as I can.”

Donna seemed to be genuinely concerned and attentive. She’d been angry and agitated the week before the surgery, and I could remember the time that she’d left me to fend for myself during an especially rough bout with the flu. I was afraid she’d end up being “unavailable” while I was recovering. I’d be able to get around fairly well in a day or so, but I’d need her help for a couple of weeks with anything that weighed more than a few pounds. Lifting more than that would be painful, and it could damage tissue, as well.

“On the way home we’ll stop at the drug store to get your prescriptions filled—or would you rather go straight home?”

It sounded as though everything would be okay. Before drifting into sleep again I mumbled, “Get the drugs first.”

When I woke up at six the following morning and half rolled out of bed to go to the bathroom, I could hardly believe that I’d finally had the surgery. It was even harder to believe that I’d paid someone a few thousand dollars to mangle me like this. I felt like shit and didn’t even want to look at what had been done, but, of course, I’d have to in order to change the bandages. My surgeon had told me what I could expect. There would be a lot of swelling and terrible bruises.

I relieved myself and washed my hands. With fresh dressings, q-tips, and Bacitracin lined up in a row on the bathroom sink, I took a deep breath and slowly unzipped the compression vest. Bad move. The pain, which had been a dull, generalized ache, became more intense, and I felt sharp stabs behind my nipples. The visual effect was just as powerful. My chest was shades of bluish-black and brownish-yellow, and it had absolutely no definition. I coached myself to take a couple of deep breaths, unhooked the zipper, and slowly eased the vest open. A few more deep breaths. Gingerly pulling off the gauze squares that were over my nipples, I dabbed at the sutures with Betadine, glopped on the Bacitracin with a long, sterile q-tip, and lightly touched a gauze pad to each nipple. My left nipple looked like it was scrunched. It wasn't as round as the other one. My ears began to buzz and darkness crept in from the outer edges of my vision. My knees were buckling. Sitting down seemed to be a good idea, so I lowered myself onto the toilet seat and carefully zipped up the compression vest. I never was very good at dealing with wounds and bodily fluids, especially when they were my own. When the buzzing left my ears and I could see more clearly, I noticed that the clear plastic bulbs hanging from the vest by safety pins looked full. One more thing to do. I scribbled the word "full" on the post-op form the nurse had sent with me, then emptied both bulbs into the toilet. Before replacing their plugs, I compressed the bulbs so that the suction would continue to draw out fluid.

I stumbled back to bed. Getting in and out was more comfortable if I sort of half-rolled on the mattress. The only safe position for my body was on my back. I had a lot of time to do nothing but grimace and drift in and out of a sleep that was filled with odd images. As soon as I closed my eyes, or so it seemed, a weird, morphine-induced dream

would fire up. One of the most vivid had me waking up in the morning with breasts that had grown back even larger than they had been before my surgery. I slept, but didn't rest.

As soon as I was able, I had to start moving my arms around a bit, even do some mock hair-combing to make sure that my skin—especially my nipples—didn't adhere to my chest. It was excruciating, but my surgeon had warned me that I'd have to actually massage my nipples if they seemed to be sticking down. Hair combing seemed like the best choice of the two.

On the third day after the surgery, drainage dropped below 15cc, so I called the hospital, as directed.

"Johnny? This is Dr. Terry. Dr. Drake is at a conference, so I'm taking his patients. You remember me? I assisted with your surgery."

The round face, crew cut, and wild, tortoiseshell glasses of the young doctor came to mind. "Yes, I remember," I answered.

"How are you doing? Where's the drainage at?"

"That's why I'm calling...it's way down below 15cc."

"Great," Dr. Terry exclaimed. "Those drains can come out now." He paused. "I remember you said that you'd have trouble getting someone to drive you back here."

"Yeah." I wouldn't be allowed to drive for several more days. Donna was giving a presentation at a local conference and couldn't drive me. My best friends were stuck at work or off on summer vacation. Even if someone were available, the ride would be a rough one. "I could go over to Student Health and have someone there take 'em out," I suggested.

“Hmm. Since they’re JP tubes, I don’t see any reason why you couldn’t just do it yourself.” He was making this sound like a walk in the park. “All you’d have to do is remove the plugs on the bulbs to release the vacuum. The end of each tube is flared just a bit, so there will be some resistance, but it shouldn’t be too bad. If you feel comfortable, go ahead and take them out. The incision will drain a small amount of fluid for a while, and you’ll need to treat them just like the other incisions...Bacitracin and gauze.”

I thought he was crazy, but all I said was, “Thank you,” and hung up. Thinking it over for a minute, I figured that I could at least give yanking the damn things a try. They were pretty small tubes, after all. If it was too hard, I’d just go to Student Health. That’s how I found myself in the bathroom, sitting on the toilet seat yet again, gripping the tube under my left arm, as close to my body as I could. I closed my eyes, set my jaw, counted one—two—three, and pulled. Pain crumpled my body, that damn buzzing in my ears returned, the darkness closed in on my vision, and I thought I’d throw up.

Jesus, what the hell was going on in Terry’s mind when he suggested I do it myself? As soon as I could stand up, I was going to see if I could get a hold of Donna and ask her to drive over to Student Health.

The phone rang five times. Damn, I thought, she’s still presenting.

“Donna, here.”

“Thank god.”

“Johnny? What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

“Sort of.” I explained the whole scenario for her and asked her if she could give me a ride.

“Sure. There’s one more break out session—you just caught me checking my e-mail—but I could skip it. I’ll lock up and come get you.”

“Thanks,” I whined.

The nurse at the reception desk was horrified that any doctor would suggest I remove drainage tubes myself and got me into an examination room in a couple of minutes.

My own doctor was on summer vacation, so I met one of the doctors who was on call that afternoon. She also noted that it was a lot to expect a patient to take out their own drains, and pulled up the back of the exam table so that I was sitting up. She warned me before she removed each one. Once they were out, a nurse scrubbed the incisions with Betadine, and then left me to lie there and recover before leaving.

On her way out the door, the nurse asked, “Do you have someone waiting for you? I can call them in, if you’d like company.”

“Yeah, thanks. Name is Donna.”

A few minutes later, Donna came in. “Was that you?”

“Huh? Did you hear me yelling all the way out front?”

“Well, yeah! It sounded pretty primal...like a trapped animal.”

“Wish they’d ‘ave shot a little local anesthetic in there before they started yanking and scrubbing.” I felt embarrassed, but she wasn’t about to let it go.

“And what was the pounding noise?”

“That was me, too,” I groaned. “I knew I didn’t dare jerk away from the doc while she was pulling, but it hurt so bad...I guess I just pounded my foot on the table.”

“It was pretty impressive, I can tell you. Still can’t believe that young pup expected you to take those things out yourself!”

“Well, it’s a good thing I’m in pain and an hour’s drive away from that guy. Right now I’ve got half a mind to pound the crap outta him.”

My anger at the inexperienced surgeon ended up subsiding long before my pain did, and my post-operative recovery would continue to be like a roller coaster ride of emotions. While my skin seemed to heal fairly quickly, the tissue underneath it took longer than usual to recover. As the pain slowly backed off it was replaced by an incessant itching and a realization that much of my skin was numb. I couldn’t help but wonder if the numbness would be permanent. By the time the summer ended, however, sensation in my chest was slowly returning to normal and nearly all of the swelling had gone down. My relief was replaced by a sinking feeling as a dent behind each nipple became more pronounced. Some of the surrounding fat had died after my surgeon removed the fibroid cysts, leaving behind a dent of sorts. My disappointment made me feel ungrateful on some level because the more the discomfort faded, the less I even thought about my chest. The mirrors in the bathroom didn’t even cross my mind. The old sense of incongruity was gone. I should have been ecstatic, but I wasn’t.

My attitude began to improve during the first week of September, as I comfortably slung a bag of books over my shoulder and headed out the door to start my graduate program in English. The wind was gusting and, after only a few steps down the sidewalk, I was surprised to notice that my shoulders were hunched forward. Waiting at the corner for the traffic light to change, I realized that I no longer had to worry about what kind of outline

my shirt would reveal as it got plastered to my chest. Standing upright, enjoying the feeling of the wind whipping the fabric around my body, I reflected on the trans men who couldn't have surgery and the many people who were unhappy with bodies they could not change. I was lucky to have a healthy, flat chest. Besides, I hadn't gone through so much trouble only to feel sorry for myself. The light turned green, and I crossed the street into a better frame of mind.

The springtime addition of a new tattoo to my paired-down pectorals would make me feel even better about my chest. Or, I should say, would help make it a non-issue.

"What can I do for you?" Dino leaned his bald head over the counter toward me as he yelled through the acid rock that reverberated through the small tattoo studio. I recognized him as the ink slinger who had done a tattoo on my shoulder two years ago, a Ying-Yang symbol with a pair of carp encircling it. Something about him was different. He had a bar through his lower lip, now, to go with the pierced nose, eyebrows, and the nickle-size wooden plugs that were stretching out his earlobes: Mr. Clean® does urban-primitive.

"Yeah," I hollered back self-consciously. "I've got an old tattoo that I want to cover up. On my chest." I handed him a drawing of Spiderman, swinging through the air with one arm, the other shooting a web toward the viewer between his draw-up knees. "Will this work?"

Dino straightened up and smiled at the drawing thoughtfully. "It could. What do you want covered?"

What I suddenly wanted most was to sink down into the floor, to disappear. "A flower."

“Let’s see it,” Dino smirked and tossed the drawing of Spiderman onto the counter. It spun around on the hard black surface and nearly slipped over the edge. The two guys who did body piercing had been listening in and stepped closer to take a look. Like Dino, they were pierced and covered in tattoos. Must’ve been a quiet day for them to take so much interest in what *I* was talking about.

Of course I realized that I’d have to take my shirt off to have this tattoo reworked, but I hadn’t thought it through. I’d never taken my shirt off in front of a total stranger, in public, and here were *three*. They’d have to notice the dent in my right breast, where the fibroid tumors had been removed and some fat had died. It wasn’t ugly, but it was kind of different. And then there was the old tattoo. I grabbed my T-shirt near my belt and, with one resolute tug, pulled it over my head.

“Damn,” Dino shook his head back and forth at the inch-high daisy with the orange petals, “it’s really close to the nipple.”

My T-shirt hung limply from one fist. Sweat trickled down my side. I felt dizzy. Out the corner of one eye, I could see the piercing guys step even closer. “Yeah, took me a while to find something I thought’d cover it.”

“Well,” he looked back down at Spiderman, leaned farther over the counter and held the drawing up against my chest, “I can put him here, just above the nipple,” he gestured with a finger, “and extend the web out over the flower. Should work perfectly.” The piercing guys shook their heads in agreement and wandered off. Dino drew back behind the counter and reached for the appointment book. “When d’ya wanna do this?”

Pulling my shirt back over my head and tucking it into my jeans, I suggested, "Thursday night?" The shirt stuck to my body and I tried to shift it around to a more comfortable position.

"Mmm, how 'bout six-thirty," Dino yelled, although the stereo had gone quiet, in between tracks.

"Great. How much will this set me back?"

"It's fairly small." He looked at the drawing again. "'Bout eighty-five bucks."

"Works for me."

I gave him my name and phone number, walked out the door, and adjusted my backpack on my shoulders. The sky was clouding up and the air smelled like rain. After a deep breath and a glance at my watch, I headed back to the campus. A student had made an appointment to talk with me about an assignment that was due at the end of the week, and it would take at least ten minutes to make it back to my office.

Amazing, I thought as I walked. Amazing that the guys at the tattoo studio hadn't reacted in any odd sort of way. There had to be some level of professionalism, I guess, if a person was going to be piercing and tattooing all manner of body parts...at least while the customer was around. Maybe my chest really was unremarkable. Hey, I was just another guy with an unsculpted chest, a growing gut, and a receding hairline. A great image, as far as I was concerned.

In the evening, over dinner, Donna asked me how things had gone at the studio. I finished chewing a mouthful of ravioli before I answered. "Dino was free, so I got to talk with him. There were a couple of other guys around when he asked me to show him the old tattoo. Thought I'd pass out when I pulled my shirt off."

“They look at you funny... say anything?”

“Nope. Not a word.”

“That’s another milestone,” Donna commented between chews. “First time you’ve showed your chest in public, right?”

“Yeah.” I leaned away from the table and slid down in my chair. “Now I just have to deal with the tattoo. When I had the flower done, I had a lot more fat and tissue on my chest. It’ll hurt like hell, this time around. It’s bigger, too.”

“I don’t get the tattoo thing at all, but just look at it as something very ‘manly,’” Donna looked at me mischievously and filled her mouth with salad.

“Yeah, right. More like ‘ridiculously painful.’”

“Eh, same thing.”

Tattoos seem to be one of those things that a person either loves or hates, and some folks still associate body art with rowdy bikers, illegal drugs, and general mayhem. I’d never thought of tattoos that way, partly because I’d known several World War Two veterans who had them. Their tattoos weren’t of the “death and destruction” variety, but were mostly depictions of pin-up girls. It was a great idea to take a meaningful piece of art with you wherever went. I had wanted a tattoo from the time that I was twelve or thirteen, and by the time I had been in the army for a couple of years, I was more than ready to get one. The military takes away a lot of a person’s autonomy and individual expression, and tattoos, for some service members, help restore a sense of distinctiveness. I’m not sure exactly what my original motivation was—self-expression, rebellion, wanting to change my

body, or wearing portable, indelible art—but, for me, tattoos have come to embody all of the above.

I can't remember the circumstances surrounding the old flower tattoo, but I appreciated the one I was about to get because it wouldn't just "cover" the flower, but would be shooting out over it, incorporating it into a symbol that was more in line with who I am. Spiderman had always been my favorite superhero. He was the unassuming science student, Peter Parker, who was trying to make the best of the major challenges in his life, one of which was an unusual body.

The following Thursday I returned to the tattoo studio, lay back on the reclining, dentist-like chair, and felt the needles tear through my chest at thirty-three strokes per second. First came the outline of the tattoo. Slowly, and painfully, Spidy began to appear. I could tell when Dino was starting on the web that shot out of the web shooter on Spiderman's right wrist. He was close to the nipple, and the pain of the needles raking my skin doubled. Finally, Dino stopped to clear the black ink out of the stylus and assure me, "Okay, just have to color in the suit and boots." After some thirty or forty minutes, just when I thought that I had ground my teeth down to the gums, Dino sprayed an anti-bacterial solution over the tattoo for the last time and wiped it clean with a paper towel.

"That's it." He sat me up and handed me a mirror. "Wadda ya think, man?"

The daisy was history. Where it had once been, a slightly puffy, red and blue Spiderman leapt off of my chest. The detail of the webbing and all of the lines through the spider suit was incredible, worth every bit of ground tooth enamel, worth every stab of pain

that told me the surgery hadn't ruined the nerve endings in my chest and that I had retained total sensation.

"Great detail."

Dino looked smug. "I'll tape a loose bandage over it, so you don't bleed all over your shirt, and then you can take off."

Donna had to inspect Dino's work right there in the kitchen, as soon as I got home. "Hmmm," she squinted at Spidy, "If you didn't know the flower was ever there, you wouldn't notice it. Just barely a little outline of it." She started to put her forefinger on the tattoo and I stepped back.

"Don't touch it!"

She straightened up. "Is it that sore?"

"Well, I kept tightening up my pects against the pain, so they hurt, but, no," I lied, "it's not too bad. I just don't want you to mess up the scab. If you scratch it, instead of letting it dry out and fall off on it's own, you scar the tattoo—take the color off the skin."

"Oh. Well, trying not to ruin it'll be a hassle."

"It's worth it. And it should heal up in a week or so." I craned my neck down to admire the tattoo. As Spiderman healed, I would begin to forget about the contour of my chest altogether.

"So," Donna remarked, after stopping me in the kitchen one morning to check out the now scab-free image of the Web Crawler on my shirtless self, "I'll bet this means you're not satisfied. That you'll be wanting to have the genital surgery next."

Why did these conversations always have to happen first thing in the morning, before I was fully awake? “Well, I have been giving it more thought,” I admitted as I filled a cup with coffee and replaced the pot on the coffee maker.

“I just knew you’d never be happy,” Donna slammed the box of corn flakes down on the counter, “that you’d have to have more and more surgery. And you told me you’d never want to have genital surgery.” The black cat sniffed at a flake that had been launched from the box and settled on the kitchen floor. Donna shooed her away and tossed the errant flake in the trash.

“Wait a minute, I said that I would take one procedure at a time, and see how I felt. And it’s the phalloplasty that I said I could never imagine having done.” I gulped coffee and continued to defend myself. “Now that my chest has been taken care of, I notice the fact that I don’t have a dick even more.”

Donna had stopped dealing with her cereal and was leaning against the counter opposite me, her arms folded across her chest. “But you got that prosthesis,” she freed one hand and brandished an index finger at my crotch, “and I thought that was helping.”

“Well, it does, a bit,” I conceded, reaching down to cup the prosthesis and shift my shorts around it. It came from a professional prosthetist in Australia. He had been asked by a transsexual friend, who was tired of trying to get oversized dildos and other packing material to look and feel right in his pants, to develop a realistic penile prosthesis. After several tries, the prosthetist came up with a flaccid silicone penis and testicles that look incredibly real, with “veins” that ghost through a barely translucent “skin.” Fifteen skin shades and three different sizes are available. The prosthesis attaches to the skin with surgical adhesive. It makes a realistic bulge in any pair of pants, warms to body

temperature, moves with the wearer, and generally feels like it's a part of the body. "I thought it would help distract my brain from the fact that I'm missing something, but it's actually doing the opposite."

Donna glared.

"Really," I explained, "you don't know what it's like to lose your dick in a room full of people. The computer lab I teach in was so hot last Wednesday that everyone was sweating. Just as I was going over the proper way to document a website in an essay, I felt my prosthesis slowly slip off of my body. Thank god I was wearing tight briefs or there would've been this slurping noise before my dick slipped down my pants leg!" Joking about the scene was the only way that I could handle the shame and embarrassment I'd felt. Donna didn't seem to appreciate the humor.

"But we haven't had a break from surgery. I just don't see why you have to focus on surgery and genitals. Why can't we just focus on us for a while?"

"A break? Us? But my chest surgery only put me out of commission for a few months, and I don't know when I'll be able to afford another procedure. And we're free to work on relationship issues any time. We can always do things together...though we never do," I retorted. "Why blame my surgery?"

Donna turned away from me, picked up her bowl of now soggy cereal, and walked toward the living room. "You'd just better consider all of the ramifications of this surgery. There's no going back."

UNDER THE KNIFE

Donna paused while reading the Saturday morning paper. "Check out this article," she suggested. "There's a new study out about how gender identity is established in the first trimester of a baby's life. A Dr. Reiner's the lead scientist."

"Wow," slipped out as I looked over her shoulder and read the first paragraph. "He works out of John's Hopkins. That's where Dr. Money did his work claiming that gender is learned. He's the psychologist who kept pushing for surgery on babies to reassign their sex...just because of a botched circumcision or a tiny penis."

"I didn't know that. Back in the dark ages of the eighties, he was one of the few health professionals who had written anything about transsexualism. He seemed supportive."

"Hmm." I finished reading the article and went into the kitchen to refill my coffee cup. Reentering the living room, I added, "I'd really like to talk about what's going on between us, sometime, today."

"Yeah, we haven't been able to talk since...when," Donna searched her brain for a date, "December?"

I nodded. It had been four or five months. "I got the feeling that you wanted to say something to me a couple of weeks ago, but held back."

"Well, finals week was coming up, and I just didn't want to get into it then. You made some remark like—oh, I know, you were ticked off at me because I was looking at sports cars again. It was something like, 'You're trying to make up your mind about which muscle car to buy, when you still haven't decided whether you want to be with me or not.'"

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Well, you’ve got your spiffy, new Cougar, now. What are you thinking about us?” The black cat had ensconced herself on my chair, so I kicked back on the couch, propping myself up with three pillows.

“Remember that article we saw in the Times?” Donna began. “The one about the transsexual guy from Illinois who did an anonymous interview?”

I remembered it. It had left me with a bottomless feeling, as though I were looking over the edge of a cliff.

“Sounded like us,” she continued, “because he and his partner said that they still loved each other. They split up, though. And that article you gave me,” Donna hurried on, “from the Web, about the different reactions women had to their partners transitioning—they all made me feel like I wasn’t the only one. There’re ways to work through this. And since we started sleeping in separate beds because you wanted some space, well...for one thing, I seem to sleep better on my own...but, really, I feel like I’ve gotten a different look at things. Last year, we talked about the possibility of living separately for a while, while we sort things out...and now that doesn’t seem as threatening to me...’course, it’s not exactly imminent...but I can see it as a possibility. Here’s where I’m at...you’ve said that you really think I’m oriented to women. I haven’t had more than one male lover, but I don’t find men’s bodies totally repulsive...and I like the way that men tend to be action-oriented, decisive...but there’s a whole lot about women that I like. I like the cooperation and concern for others, I like the native smell and feel of women.”

How long had I been offering Donna resources for partners of transgender men? Over two years? And how long had she suggested in a sideways fashion that her sleep problems were connected with my “vibes” before I couldn’t stand it any longer and moved

to a separate bed? This all sounded surreal. I didn't know what to think or say. I just decided to go with the flow of the conversation. "When you've mentioned this before," I finally told her, "I've thought about that friend of Genie's, the woman who loves to be around other women, but wants to partner and have sex with men, and I couldn't understand why you thought that was strange or confusing. A lot of heterosexual women I've known prefer to spend most of their time with other women."

Donna nodded and then asked, "What about you?"

"I'm learning that I enjoy being with other men, but that I also like being with women. I mean, when I spent time with the gay/bi men's group, I really felt out of place because the gay male pop culture—actually, pop culture, in general—is definitely not my thing. If I were with another man, as a partner, I'd want us to have a social life more like Jay and Greg's...they're really out, but they don't always party at gay bars or only have gay friends. They're just regular folks with a variety of friends. That would be me. But I'm still attracted to women. I'm still attracted to you."

"That makes me feel good." Donna looked down and picked at her fingernails. After a few seconds she continued. "Our relationship doesn't seem like a romantic one anymore, but I think it could be. We've got such similar values, and that's hard to come by. None of my other partners could understand my love for animals or my vegetarianism. We're really similar, and we can respect and appreciate each other's differences, too." Donna squirmed uncomfortably, "I'm babbling, now, but I really want to come away from this conversation with a plan for the summer...something concrete that we can do as a next step to working through this."

I wondered what she had in mind, and doubted that she believed what she was saying. It was such a sudden, surreal shift from the usual state of affairs. “What’re you wanting to do?”

“Well, we could do different things. We could even live apart for the summer. What I really think that I want to do, though, is to spend more time with women...and not just gay women. I’m already going to that women’s group, but I want to see my friend Amy more often. We used to spend a lot of time together, but we’ve sort of drifted apart, and I don’t want to lose her as a friend. So, I just want to be with women more...not sexually...just *be* with women, to help me decide if I’m really bi, or what.” Donna paused, thoughtfully. “I’ve resisted identifying as bisexual, you know. In that community I was part of in Wisconsin, it was terribly unpopular to call yourself bi, and I wanted desperately to fit in. I didn’t want to keep internalizing my homophobia, either, so it seemed best to be lesbian all the way. Now, I think that it might not be frightening to explore the possibility that I’m really bi, and that I just prefer the company of women. Or, I might be a transgendered lesbian. I don’t know. My last two partners didn’t like my masculinity. I guess that I haven’t really thought about what two feminine women would be and do in a partnership...that’s just not something that I can imagine being part of.”

“Hmm.” I nodded. This really was an awfully big leap from where Donna had been during that last argument we’d had, but living apart for a while was certainly an attractive possibility. We had to do something different, because what we had been doing so far wasn’t working.

“I’m not sure that I’m really comfortable with a completely open relationship, though. I don’t want to ask you to put your life on hold while I figure out mine, but I’m

really afraid that I'd be too jealous—and I'd be worried about STDs (sexually transmitted diseases), especially if you had sex with another man...that's twice as dangerous."

"Don't think I haven't considered that," I assured her, not believing my ears. "Even safe sex isn't completely risk free, I know. And open relationships are full of potential trouble. But, I gotta tell you, it's been tough to shut down my libido, especially over the last couple of months. I've run into women who've thought I'm cute. A clerk in Penney's was flirting with me when I bought that new pair of shorts last week, and Delia told me that one of her students, a straight woman, wrote a journal entry about me after I spoke to her class. This woman had seen me waiting for the elevator, before class, and thought she'd like to go out with me. When she saw that I was the day's speaker, and that I'd lived as a woman, she was really surprised...but not put-off, either. And then there was the guy who cruised me in the grocery store..."

Donna interrupted, "You are a cutie...and the ultimate sensitive guy. And, I was thinking about Kaye's husband the other day...how he takes care of the home while she works, but still offers to beat up any guy that gives her trouble...I think you're like that, and it's attractive. I just don't know. I've got really fond memories of Carol Ann, and I'll never want those to go away, but I think I've finally accepted your transition, that this is who you are, what you needed to do. Yesterday, when you told me that you might be able to afford genital surgery in the next year, I just thought 'Oh, well, good. He was getting depressed about not being able to have it for five or ten years.' I knew you were surprised that I didn't freak. Actually," Donna looked down and fiddled with her fingernails again, "I'm wondering if it wouldn't be easier to relate to you, uh, sexually, if you've got all the parts in the right places. But, I don't know...this is just a big time of change for me...for us." Her

eyes shifted back up toward a corner of the living room ceiling. “We’ve got to go through it one step at a time, but I can see us getting through it, now, without an ugly blow-up and a lot of blaming.”

Donna’s words were hopeful, but I wasn’t so sure that she had prophesied accurately. She still said the name Carol Ann as though it represented an entirely different human being, and there was this sudden statement about the surgery making things easier for her. I could hardly believe it, and most of the time we had seemed to be talking around things, as though both of us had been trying to convince ourselves of things we didn’t believe, or avoid what we were really thinking. A week after our conversation, I would discover that I could, indeed, just barely afford genital surgery. Because the Canadian surgeon I wanted to do the surgery had decided that post-operative care did not need to be quite as lengthy as he once thought, and the American dollar had risen in value against the Canadian dollar, the price of surgery and post-operative care had dropped by nearly a thousand dollars. I had also received an offer from one credit card company for a loan of up to three thousand dollars at 4.9 percent interest. I’d be making fairly high monthly payments for longer than I wanted to think about, but with relief from body dysphoria in reach, I had to go for it.

“Julie,” I announced to my therapist on a March afternoon, “I still can’t quite believe it, but I’ve discovered that I’ll be able to afford genital surgery this year and I’d like for you to write me a recommendation letter.”

“Are you still planning on going to the surgeon in Montreal?” Julie asked. When I nodded that I was, she followed up, “now, explain to me again which procedure you want to have done, and why you’ve chosen that one.”

“I want to have a clitoral release. That’s where the surgeon, basically, cuts around the clitoris, to release it, and then pulls it up about two inches. He sews the labia majora under it and inserts silicone testicular implants. I still won’t be able to pee standing up, but at least I’ll have all my parts where my brain says they should be, even if they aren’t as big as I’d like. And the surgeon doesn’t mess around with the clitoral nerve, so I don’t have to worry very much about losing sexual function. That can happen with the other procedures.”

“What if this doesn’t turn out to be good enough, and you want to have phalloplasty?”

“I can do more down road, like have my urethra re-routed and a full-size penis constructed; I’m not burning any bridges with this surgery. Besides the low risk of messing up my ability to orgasm and the lower cost, this is the big reason I’m choosing this particular procedure. Well, and it will all still be my original equipment...not a piece from my arm and my thigh sewn in different places...just a reconfiguration of what’s always been there, in the proper location.”

Julie was nodding. “Alright, other than a letter from me, what do you need to do to schedule?”

“I have to ask my doc at Student Health to write a letter, have a bunch of lab tests done, and send the surgeon an application and medical history, along with a recent photograph of my face. When they’ve got everything, a nurse will call me from Montreal to set up a date for surgery. I’ll have to wait anywhere from a month to a year, depending on what the surgery schedule is like.”

“How do you feel about the long wait?” Julie asked.

I shifted in the chair and ran my hand through my hair. "Well, just having a date for surgery will have to help me feel better, and I don't really have a choice in the matter."

Fortunately, my patience wouldn't be tested very strenuously. One month after I spoke with Julie, all of the test results and necessary paperwork had accumulated in the office of Dr. Dusault, and his nurse called from Montreal to set up a date for surgery. The fourth of August, about four months in the future, was the earliest available date, and it would just barely allow me the time I'd need to recover enough to head back to classes in September. I'd be walking funny, no doubt, but I'd be walking.

Once again, I had to wonder how Donna would deal with my surgery. When I talked with her about setting up a date, she hadn't said very much. There were some detached platitudes about knowing how much it meant to take this big step and a discussion about how her job and fear of flying made it impossible for her to accompany me. Her calmness was unsettling, and was heavy with resignation, and a sort of pulling away. Loss and separation dampened down my excitement yet again, but I recognized that it was better I go alone. I wouldn't have to deal with the silence and discomfort that preceded my chest surgery, and I'd be free to celebrate my surgical results as I recovered in a convalescent house in Montreal. I doubted there would be much of a celebratory atmosphere when I returned to Iowa.

On the day before my surgery, I was backing out toward the street and very nearly hit the trash cans on the edge of the driveway. Whether I was distracted by the fact that I was on my way to Montreal to have my genitals rearranged or I was just half-asleep because it was a quarter to five in the morning, I wasn't sure. It was probably a bit of both. I didn't

want a repeat of that first trip to see the endocrinologist in Iowa City, I thought, remembering the damage I'd done to Donna's pickup almost three years ago. I took a deep breath before I continued backing out, and managed to arrive safely at the house of the friend who would drive my car back from Des Moines.

"Hey, there," Darren gave me his standard greeting, closing his front door and loping down the sidewalk to meet me. As we approached the car, which I'd parked directly under a street light, he seemed to bend his tall, lanky frame to look at me a bit more closely before asking, "Would you like for me to drive? You must have a lot of on your mind."

"Yeah," I admitted, "I'm pretty distracted. You awake enough? I think we have time to stop for coffee if you need..."

"No, I'm fine. Just get in and relax. I'll get us there in one piece."

As Darren drove through the nearly deserted streets, turned the car toward the on-ramp, then merged with the early morning traffic on the interstate, he rambled on about getting up early, traveling, and a few other things that I admit I never really heard. It was so incredible that I was actually getting on a plane and leaving Iowa, for the first time since I'd moved to the state, to go have sex reassignment surgery. I was actually going away and returning with a dick and balls. But that was what lurked in the back of my mind...the surgery...would it go well, would the result be good? I'd seen four photographs of the procedure called metadoioplasty, and only one of the simpler procedure that I was having performed. I wondered what I would look like. On some level, I didn't care so much about appearances because, at the very least, my genitals would get rearranged enough so that I could be more comfortable with them...I hoped.

Darren pulled onto the ramp at the airport labeled "Departures." I decided that I'd better just focus on the present, and as I stepped out of the car I gave him a reminder. "Keys in the potted tomato plant on the back porch. Donna will fish 'em out when she gets home from work."

"Got it," he confirmed, moving back toward the hatch to pull out my suitcase. He dropped it on the pavement and threw his arms around me. "I'll be thinking about you tomorrow."

As I watched my little car disappear, I wished he could have stayed until my plane left. I shrugged off the wish, picked up my bag, and headed for the ticket counter.

"May I see your driver's license and your passport or birth certificate?" the ticket agent asked after she'd punched up my reservation on her computer.

This is where it began. How many times would someone notice the sex listed on my birth certificate and ask me about it? For once I was glad that my driver's license also read "Female." At least they both matched. I'd probably have more trouble if they didn't.

"Oh," she said, and my heart jumped before I heard her add, "I see that your father is from Canada. Where did he grow up?"

I relaxed. "Alberta."

"I'm from Vancouver, originally. Are you going to visit relatives?"

"No, not this time."

"That's too bad. Well," she handed me my identification and my boarding passes, "your luggage is checked through to your final destination. I hope you enjoy Montreal."

I thanked her and turned in the direction of the concourse, my mind beginning to settle into what I have come to refer to as "travel limbo," a semi-hypnotic state, a unique

experience, wholly separate from anything preceding the departure and following the arrival. Sounds of different sorts of engines. Wheels rolling over different kinds of surfaces. Crying, clapping, and laughter. Expressions of loss or potential. Unusual landscapes. A space in which decisions beyond window or aisle, smoking or non-smoking, need not be made. Nothing is required, except to simply “be.” Worrying and wondering wasn’t going to help. I just needed to concentrate on getting there, on trying to enjoy the trip. Because I had been pouring most of my energy and money into my education, I hadn’t had the time or funds to travel anywhere in a long, long time. Although I knew people who did, it just didn’t make sense to me to take out a student loan for a vacation. In any case, it felt good to finally be traveling again.

Once on board, all I could see out the window of the small jet were its engines, suspended from wings attached to the top of the fuselage, instead of the bottom. When they rumbled to life and the RJ-85 rolled down the taxi way, I leaned back and closed my eyes. This was going to be some experience.

The premonition, as it turned out, had been correct. Rattled from flying through turbulent skies and three hours behind schedule because of lightning-filled thunderstorms, I gratefully arrived in a warm, humid, overcast Montreal. I checked into the small bed and breakfast my surgeon’s office had recommended, not caring that I hadn’t had any supper, and looking forward to crashing on my bed. At first, it felt good to lie on the cool quilt, look up at the slanted, light-blue ceiling of the upstairs dormer, and listen to children’s laughter and shrieks coming from the next door neighbors’ pool. As I relaxed I began to notice that very little air made its way through the open window, and that the room felt damp and close. I thought about the night before I had left my home state for army basic training—another

warm, rainy night—and all the other times that I’d been on the cusp of a huge change in my life. There’d almost always been another person there with me, or I’d spent half of the evening talking with my oldest sister or a friend on the phone, dreading change, uneasy about the unknown, not wanting to be alone. This time, I had called Donna, but we’d only spoken for a few minutes, and here I was, now, by myself, only a bit nervous, drifting off to sleep.

At seven the next morning, I had left the bed and breakfast behind and was sitting on the hospital bed that I would occupy for the next day or so. A tall, blonde, athletic looking man in a lab coat appeared. He thrust out a hand and introduced himself in a deep-voiced, French accent. “I am Dr. Dusault. You are first on my list today.” Easing himself into a nearby chair, he crossed his legs and asked, “Do you have any questions about the procedure?”

“Well, first of all, I want to make sure that my girlfriend gets a call once I’m out of surgery.”

“No problem,” Dusault assured me with a wave of his hand. “Just remind the nurse when she takes you up to the operating room.”

“Thanks. I know she must be worried.” I paused, gathering my thoughts. “I’ve seen the photos and diagrams you sent, and read about the procedure, so I guess I really don’t have any questions...unless there’s anything you could add to that material.”

Dusault leaned forward and became a bit more animated. He obviously loved his work. “Well, for one thing, your testicles will not be joined in a single scrotum. Because we’re not closing off the vagina in this procedure, only the anterior ends of the labia can be

used. However,” he smiled and took on a confidential tone, “the implants are quite large, so your testicles will be as big, if not bigger than most other men’s—”

“Huh, break my heart,” I grinned.

“and,” he continued, smiling back, “like some other men, you’ll appear to have a ridge of skin between the scrotum and anus.”

I nodded. “Sounds fine.”

“Good” he answered, slapping his knee emphatically and standing up. “If you have no more questions, I’ll see you upstairs.”

I shook my head and Dusault stepped to the other side of a curtain that separated the room to talk with Gene. A quiet, middle-aged guy, Gene had arrived at the hospital just after I had. He was friendly enough, but was obviously more comfortable asking questions than answering them. I did learn that his phalloplasty had not been completely successful—he was here to have Dusault fix his blocked urethra. He hadn’t urinated normally in three weeks. A nurse bustled in with forms and an admonition to make one last visit to the bathroom after I’d filled them out. As soon as she left, a large, disheveled man shambled into the room, introducing himself as the anesthesiologist. He read my chart and asked me my weight.

“My last surgery was pretty rough,” I told him. “I had a lot of trouble waking up and breathing on my own.”

He nodded his shaggy, gray head. “Noted.” He paused and then added on his way out the door, “You shouldn’t have any problems this time around.”

He and the rest of the staff were so confident and relaxed that I didn’t find myself getting any more uptight as I undressed and put on a green hospital gown. Still, the contrast

between my experience and theirs was sharp. As I walked upstairs with a nurse and climbed on a gurney just outside the operating room, I remembered that, while I was experiencing something special, this was all in a day's work for them. They'd been through many operations like mine. What had I expected, a big brass band in pre-op?

Shit! was my next thought as the anesthesiologist inserted the IV needle into my left hand and injected a sedative. I'd forgotten to tell him that sedatives had always made me nauseous, woozy. But there wasn't any need. I rested calmly until someone came to wheel me into the operating room. I slid onto the operating table and the anesthesiologist patted my shoulder. Everything seemed comfortingly familiar: the lights were blinding, electronic devices were flashing, and there were busy nurses on the periphery. Dusault entered in a mask, and patted my leg firmly. "Alright, Johnny," he said, "we're ready to go." They were definitely ready for me, because his voice was the last thing I remembered.

"I have to change your ice, Johnny," a woman's voice explained as something was placed between my legs. It was a cool, uncomfortable wad. No, it was the wad attached to my body that was uncomfortable. The ice bag was on the wad. Oh, yeah...surgery...package. That's funny, a voice in my head quipped, rocks on ice. The face that went with the voice came into focus. The woman they both belonged to had a thin smile and curly, auburn hair. "My name is Colette," she introduced herself in a soft French accent and laid a hand on my right arm. "The surgery went very well and you are back in your room. How are you feeling? Would you like something for pain?"

"Oh, yeah," I told her. The wad was throbbing away incessantly, and I wanted to get some more sleep.

“Before I give you your shot, do you need to go to the bathroom?”

Some sort of sensation suggested that I did. “I think so.”

“Okay, you’ve got a catheter with a plug. Let me show you.” The nurse lifted my gown, to reveal a thin, mesh-like pair of underwear. She pulled these down a bit and extricated a clear tube from underneath the huge mass of gauze over my groin. “Just take the red cap off of the tube and let it drain into this urinal.” She handed me the urinal and began to leave the room. “Next time, you’ll be able to get up and use the toilet. I’ll be back with your injection.”

Much of the rest of the day, and throughout the night, I slept between visits by the nurse.

“I couldn’t believe you,” Gene said through the curtain the following morning. It sounded like he was eating crackers very cautiously. “Every time the nurse came in and offered you a shot, you’d yell, ‘Wow! Can I have another one already? Hit me!’”

“What can I say,” I shrugged and shoved a big spoonful of oatmeal into my mouth. I remembered the pain...including the pain in my heels and elbows from the hard hospital bed and the rough sheets. I also remembered feeling claustrophobic, wanting to scream and leap from the bed. That I put down to the morphine and the way it messes with my head. Still, I had been grateful for my shambling, shaking, 3 a.m. excursion to the bathroom. My catheter had dripped as I swayed on the toilet seat and sighed.

“Eh, if I hadn’t been so sick, I’d’ve taken ‘em, too,” Gene admitted. “Sorry I kept groaning and throwing up. Anesthesia always screws up my stomach.”

“Don’t apologize.” I put my oatmeal bowl back on the tray, glad I’d finished eating my breakfast before the subject had changed. Gene’s wife and Dr. Dusault arrived, cutting the conversation short.

“Good morning,” Dusault beamed, hands in the front pockets of his lab coat. “You are feeling well, I trust.”

“Better’n last night,” I admitted.

“Much better,” Gene agreed.

Dusault nodded and then announced, “Both of your surgeries went very well, and you can go to the residence as soon as you’re ready.”

Gene’s wife, Anna, a petite woman with a low voice and graying hair, looked from her husband to me. “I’ve talked with Dr. Dusault, and—if you like, Johnny—we can all drive over to the residence together. Gene and I have a rental car, and we know the way from the last time we were here.”

“Great.” I answered, looking forward to getting out of the hard hospital bed as soon as possible. “Preciate it.”

“I’ll be over to talk with you individually and drop off your prescriptions around one o’clock,” Dusault informed us. “Settle in at the residence and get some rest. I’ll see you later.”

Within the hour Gene and I had been released from our IVs and Anna was negotiating the streets of Montreal, trying to avoid potholes as Gene and I balanced our tender parts precariously on our seats. Vaguely hoping that the residence would have better ventilation than the bed-and-breakfast had, and that the beds would be softer than they were in the hospital, I glanced over at the rusting AMC Pacer in the lane next to us. The driver, a

teenage guy, had his arm around a girl who was snuggling up to him and falling out of her halter top. The contrast between what was happening in their car and what was happening in ours was comical, but I couldn't help thinking, again, of the things I'd missed as a teenager...rites of passage...guess what I was doing now was a type of a rite. I brought myself back to the present as Anna pulled the car up to a large, two-story, brick house.

"Here we are," Anna said, turning from her place at the steering wheel to grin at Gene and me. "I'll get your bags *this* time, but you'll have to carry 'em out of here on your own!"

The large hardwood door to the house opened and a round, sunny woman emerged, clapping her hands when she recognized Gene. "Oh, monsieur Gene, it's good to see you again so soon!" She kissed him on either cheek. "Are you back for a visit?"

"No," Gene winced, beginning to waddle slowly into the house. "Unfortunately, Dr. Dusault had to take care of a problem."

The woman's lips puckered as she frowned sympathetically. "Oh, I'm so sorry." Then, noticing that I was waddling, too, she introduced herself. "I'm Danielle. You must be Johnny." After kissing me on either cheek, she started giving directions. "Gene and Anna, your room is on the left, just as you enter—the Debussy room. Johnny, you should turn left also, but you are in the Wagner room."

At the end of the short hallway were three rooms. Each door had a small plastic bust of a classical composer attached to it, along with a nameplate. Debussy was on the left, Mozart at the end, and Wagner on the right. The late morning sun was streaming through the open doors of the rooms and into the hallway. A checked quilt covered the bed in my

room, a small wardrobe stood in one corner, and a television set occupied another corner. It was a lot like a large motel room.

“Would you like a small tour of the first floor before you settle in?” Danielle asked, lingering at my door.

Despite my grogginess and soreness, I took her up on the offer. Glancing at the pale, tiny, austere face of Wagner on my way out the door, I smiled. As long as no one is singing, I thought, Wagner’s great.

On the tour of the house, I noticed that it had three floors. Danielle informed me that it could house twenty people very comfortably. She pointed out the first bathroom we came to. “This is the bathroom that you will be using. There are spray bottles of an antibacterial and also paper towels. You must use both of them every time you take a shower or go to the bathroom. Because so many people here are healing, we must be very careful to keep the bathrooms clean of germs.”

I nodded and we continued on to the kitchen and the huge, open, common area. A table for twelve ran perpendicular to a stone fireplace, and on the right was a wall of windows with a line of couches and easy chairs beneath them. Three women occupied some of these seats.

“Well, hello there,” one of them said in a husky, meaningful tone.

I smiled back and continued to walk on through with Danielle to the next room. It had an incredibly high ceiling and contained a blue and white tiled pool. In one corner a Jacuzzi steamed and bubbled quietly, in another, two large tropical plants bent over the edge of the pool.

“That is all,” announced Danielle. “I must go prepare lunch. Please talk with me if you have any questions.”

Instead of following her back through the common area, I stood by the Jacuzzi for a while, watching it steam. How should I deal with those women? I had to pass them to get back to my room, and I certainly couldn’t avoid them for four days. They seemed to be transsexual, and I’d had more than a few bad experiences with MtFs. Even my friend Patty, an MtF I’d met through the support group on campus, was leery of “trans women in packs,” to her they were catty, cutting, and altogether deadly. Finally, I resigned myself to being objectified, characterized as a bastard or an asshole, or just generally harassed, and pushed through the door to the main part of the house.

“Hello, shug,” a blonde woman drawled as she slowly uncoiled the long set of legs she’d had folded under her and stood up. A bandage covered her nose and there was a small incision at her throat. She must have had the bridge of her nose and her adam’s apple shaved down a bit.

“Hi, I’m Johnny.”

She took my hand, cocked her head to the side, and conspiratorially shared that her name was Laura. The other two women were busy appraising me, out loud, as if I weren’t there.

“He looks *good*. You’d never know, would you?” A woman with long, black hair, and a blinding collection of jewelry was the speaker.

“Oh, I’d look twice. But it’s really no big deal for FtMs,” the red-head next to her replied.

“True. Wonder what he’s had done.”

Laura rolled her eyes. I interrupted them with a question. “And your names are...?”

“I’m Deena,” the first woman answered. “This,” she said, indicating the woman next to her, “is Tanya. We were just saying how good you look. You really could pass for a man anywhere.”

“That’s the goal, isn’t it?” Laura broke in sarcastically. “Sometimes,” she turned to me, “we get so hung up on ‘passing’ that we forget to ‘be.’”

One of the women on the couch sighed, and both looked thoughtful. It soon became apparent that Deena and Tanya felt awkward and were nervous about their upcoming surgery. Once we talked about the discomfort, though, a lot of it evaporated and we began to get to know one another.

“So,” Laura ventured at some point during the following day, “what did you have done—if you don’t mind my asking.” Tanya and another woman, Jenny, sat on either side of her, on the big couch in the common area.

“Yeah,” Jenny chimed in from her place on a recliner as she flipped her curly brown hair and shifted her weight on a bright orange, inflatable rubber donut, “what do they, uh, do for you? I don’t know anything about *your* surgery.” Jenny knew plenty about how a vagina was constructed because her’s was only five days old.

“There are a few choices. At the high end is phalloplasty. Usually, a piece of skin, a nerve, and a blood vessel are taken from the forearm and made into a five or six-inch penis. It’s possible to try to hook up the nerves so that there’s sensation. A prosthetic device—a rod or a pump—can be added later so that you can have an erection. The downside of this surgery is that the nerves may get damaged and not provide much sensation in the penis, the

skin from the arm may not survive the transplant, the nerves in the arm the material was taken from might get screwed up, and the urethra may not work right... Gene's here because his urethra got blocked...the doctors where he lives had to use a needle to drain his bladder."

"God almighty!" Tanya interjected.

"Yeah. All that for not less than thirty thousand dollars. Not for me." Everyone looked thoughtful. "There's also metadoioplasty, which seems to be more successful, more popular, and less expensive...around twelve thousand dollars. They release the labia from around the clitoris, pull it up a couple of inches higher on the body, wrap the labia minora around it, and insert testicular implants into the labia majora."

Jenny's face screwed up into a question. "Is...uh...it...big enough?"

"The clitoris?" I asked. When she nodded I explained, "Testosterone makes the clitoris grow from one to two inches larger. It really does become a small penis."

"That makes sense," Laura said thoughtfully. "The penis corresponds to the clitoris and the skin that covers the testicles is, in a way, the labia."

"Exactly," I explained, "That's one of the reasons that I had the surgery I did. It's like the metadoioplasty, but it doesn't require a hysterectomy beforehand. They don't reroute the urethra so you can pee standing up, and they don't completely close up the vagina. I can have that done later, when I've got about twelve grand to spare."

All the women shook their heads. Jenny guessed, "So, you probably look like you've had a cold shower?"

"Yep," I grinned, "a *very* cold one. Just call me 'Stubby.'"

Tanya wagged her finger at me, broke into a mischievous grin, and warned, “Don’t jump into a cold lake or your dick will get sucked into your body and disappear completely!”

We groaned and she shrugged. Bad jokes became common, and they were jokes that are probably only funny to those of us who were in the house at the time, sharing our experience. Still, humor helped everyone who was recovering deal with the pain and post-op routines. We called the waddling gait that everyone employed “the Montreal shuffle” and toasted each other with prune juice at nearly every meal. Most of us were walking around with long catheters that were taped to our thighs instead of hooked up to a bag, and someone eventually suggested an amendment to the old Mae West line: “Is that your catheter, or are you happy to see me?” We discussed the shape and color of the bruising in our groin area and shared the awkward moments we’d had during our transitions. Humor also helped those who were going to have surgery deal with their anxiety. They saw that what they were about to undergo was difficult, but hardly impossible, and they knew that those who would still be around when they came out of the hospital would support them and be able to offer helpful advice.

My recovery was nothing, compared to that of the women who had essentially had a hole cut in their body, their testicles removed, their penis turned inside out to form their new vagina, and labia constructed around the opening. It’s an incredibly invasive and involved procedure, and the recovery time is fairly long. Dilators, like variably sized dildos, must be used several times a day to keep the new canal open and to exercise surrounding muscles. Eventually, a dilator only has to be used once a week, but dilation must be done for the rest of the woman’s life.

Saturday morning, two days after I'd had my surgery, I was finally going to have the catheter removed, get my first look at my new penis and gonads, and find out what my recovery time would be like. It had already been full of sleepless, pain-filled nights, days of discomfort, and worries about what I'd have when the swelling went down and the tissue healed. I imagined that I'd face more of the same.

Dr. Dusault arrived at one o'clock, as promised. I gingerly took off my roomy shorts and peeled back the mesh underwear so that he could remove the catheter and the bandages that hadn't been touched since my surgery. Under the loose, fluffy layers of white gauze were a few layers of gauze that had been soaked in paraffin. They were molded to my body and were a mottled yellow and red color. Slowly, Dusault began to peel this back. Down through my groin, and part way up my abdomen, ran a deep, bluish-purple bruise. My heart sank as Dusault and I surveyed the area. He pointed out a red, meaty mass near the center—what used to be my clitoris had been moved two or three inches higher—and the implants embedded on either side of it. Just beneath my new penis, and between the implants, ran the very narrow ridge of skin that Dusault had mentioned before the surgery, probably the leftover labial folds. The whole thing reminded me of a baboon's butt...until I looked more closely and saw all of the stitches. Held together by bailing wire. I prayed that Dusault hadn't stuck a needle in the wrong place.

"Looks good," Dusault said, making the face an artist does when indicating that they think their work isn't half bad. "The worst of the swelling should begin to subside in one to three weeks, and then everything will be better defined."

"And I'll be itching like crazy as the hair begins to grow back in," I muttered as I began to put my clothes back on.

“Oh, yes. Right,” he responded absently before his head snapped up and he announced, “You can take a shower or bath, now, as usual. Just replace one sheet of gauze over the wound after you do.”

“No rinsing with Hibitane or anything? No antibiotic ointment?” I asked incredulously.

“No, no. You’re fine. And you can stop replacing the gauze when you no longer find blood or drainage on it.”

That was it. It was over. All I had to do now was take it easy for a couple of days, return home, and give myself a chance to heal.

Actually, a lot of healing was already taking place, in this space far away from the usual routine. I began to realize how toxic my relationship with Donna had become and how much I had lost by not being with more trans-positive people as I transitioned. It was going to be difficult to go back, but there were some changes I could make in my life that would make it a lot better.

Flying for five hours on a freshly reconfigured set of genitals was anything but comfortable. The humor of trying to decide whether or not I should declare my newly acquired testicles on the U.S. Customs form had long since faded. I winced the whole way and my hands moved protectively into my lap every time someone opened up the overhead baggage compartment near my seat. My discomfort was only eclipsed by my anxiety about Donna’s state of mind and the future of our relationship. She had seemed reluctant to see me again when I’d spoken with her on the phone, and I felt less and less willing to continue participating in what I began to see as a never ending period of mourning. It contrasted so sharply with the joy I’d shared in Montreal and the celebratory phone calls I’d received

from friends in Iowa. I was becoming more alive, while life with Donna continued to fade. When I shuffled off the plane and discovered that Donna was nowhere around, I took her absence as an omen. I also got mad. Wincing, waddling, and fuming past the kissing couples and grandparents hugging their grandchildren, I headed down the concourse toward the baggage claim area. Donna eventually emerged from the crowd and fell in along side of me.

“Wondered if you’d make it,” I growled.

“Well, I didn’t even go into work,” she answered defensively. “I stayed at home to see if you’d call about delays. When I figured I couldn’t stay home any longer, I hurried down here.”

The weakness of the logic was so transparent that I had to point it out to her.

“Could’ve just called the airline, you know.”

“Oh, well, yeah,” she said, as we stopped at the luggage carousel and waited for bags to go by. “Too bad the deal with Toby picking you up didn’t work out.”

Worse than she knew. “His son’s flight doesn’t get in until 5:30 this evening, and I know I couldn’t wait around here for four hours.” As if to remind me why, a sharp pain stabbed at my penis. “It would have been fun, though,” I managed to laughed at the thought, “because he was promising to show up with a dozen roses and a box of condoms.”

“Why would he do that?” she asked as though it were the stupidest idea she’d ever heard of.

My smile disappeared. “Because he’s happy for me?”

“I don’t get it,” Donna shrugged, avoiding my eyes. “Your backpack’s coming around,” she announced, moving closer to the carousel. “I’ll grab it.”

We ambled from the terminal to Donna's Cougar and rode most of the way home in silence, as we had on the other post-operative trip home. After depositing me and my bag in the house, Donna went off to work. I headed directly for my bed, gingerly lying on my back when I got there. It felt so good not to be sitting upright in a moving vehicle. The familiar bed, quiet space, exhaustion, and a fresh round of pain killers put me to sleep. I didn't even hear Donna come home from the office.

As light began to infiltrate my room the next morning, I was woken by relentless whining and pawing at my door. When I was awake enough to look, the clock read 6:33 a.m. Groaning my way out of bed, I made it to the back door to let the dogs out into the yard and turned toward the kitchen; I had to get something to eat so I could take more drugs.

"You're gonna spoil the dogs," Donna's voice griped from the depths of her room. "Should've made 'em go back to sleep."

"Good morning to you, too," I grumbled back.

It added to the physical pain, I thought when I'd gotten back into bed, staring up at the ceiling with an uneasy stomach now full of cereal and pain pills, to know that I had to get out of the house as soon as possible. It hadn't fully registered until this moment. I probably hadn't been able to admit it to myself. For three years Donna had been fearfully clinging to a relationship she couldn't possibly want, terrified of being alone, while angrily taking shots at me for ruining her dream. Why the hell had I stayed? I couldn't remember anymore. Unlike Donna, I was used to living alone for long stretches, and all my dreams of the perfect relationship had been smashed to pieces years before. But, maybe I had jumped into a relationship with her out of loneliness, myself. I wasn't sure. We had such different ideas of what a healthy relationship was that I realized we probably wouldn't have stayed

together very long under any circumstances. I wished that I had had the emotional resources to leave Donna's house when I first realized she didn't want me to transition. I would have saved us both a lot of heartache. Actually, there didn't seem to be any appropriate place to lay all the blame. It was just life. Time might give me better perspective, but at the moment I felt angry, and I felt like a chump. I wasn't perfect by any stretch, but I was basically a decent man, and I didn't deserve or want all this grief. I also knew that I obviously wasn't welcome here, and Donna wasn't the least bit interested in partnering with me. It was time for me to heal up and move on.

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